CHANCES

A·HAMILTON GIBBS

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CHANCES

By A. Hamilton Gibbs

GUN FODDER

SOUNDINGS

LABELS

BLUEBOTTLES

HARNESS

CHANCES

CHANCES

A NOVEL

BY

A. HAMILTON GIBBS

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". . . through all the chances and changes of life till death do you part."

PART ONE

Chapter One

Two small, sturdy boys stood alone on the empty deck of the Channel steamer.

"D'you know what I think?" said one.

"No. What?"

"I think this Meuvret man has forgotten all about us."

They were manifestly a little forlorn, each with a brand-new suit case at his feet, shivering perhaps not entirely because of the nip in the early morning air.

They wore black bowler hats, under which gleamed reddish hair and dark blue eyes. Their blunt-nosed faces were powdered with freckles. Beyond doubt there was more than a touch of Scots in them.

The boat was tied to the dock at St. Malo. Cargo was being taken volubly out of her hold by men who were blue-bloused and wooden-shod. All the other passengers had gone ashore half an hour ago, some met by vociferous families, although it was only six o'clock in the morning, others stepping out with their handbags and turning to right or left under the high ramparts with the assurance of foreknowledge.

"What do you suppose we'd better do?" There was a deep frown on the older boy's face as he opened the conversation again, and a note of fierceness in his voice in order to hide, even from himself, the mere suspicion that he was a little frightened. "Why on

earth isn't the man here? He ought to have found out what time the boat was going to land!"

The younger one laughed uncertainly. It was the first time they had ever been away from home, and the crowd on shore was pretty queer looking, not a bit like what he had imagined it would be. "The only thing to do is to wait till they kick us off the boat." That at least had become painfully familiar through a rough night's crossing. "If he doesn't come by that time, there must be some one here who can talk enough English to tell us how to get to the school." Then the vague dread of the unknown yielded to the urgent claims of the inner man, and he burst out, "I wish to goodness we could get something to eat! Aren't you simply starving?"

The older one shuddered. "Good lord! I sha'n't be able to eat for days. I feel absolutely rotten. . . . Look!" He nudged his brother. "D'you suppose that's the chap?"

Four eager eyes appraised a Frenchman who came scurrying along by the Customs House in an overcoat, the breeze ruffling his beard.

The younger one made a face and, for some intuitive reason that couldn't have been analyzed, said, "Hope not! Great Scott, that would be perfectly beastly!"

At that moment, unperceived by either of them, there came up the gangplank a tall figure dressed in the long black skirt and shovel hat of the French priest. He stepped on to the deck and went straight over to the boys. The morning sun caught the unshaven white stubble that stuck out of a brick-red face like silver wire. A pair of glasses was clamped

to the bridge of a large nose; but when he took off his hat and said in fluent English, "Good morning! Aren't you Tom and Jack Ingleside?" there was something in his eyes that melted their instinctive distrust of his strange appearance and made both boys grin up at him with relief and expectation, much as puppies wag their tails when they recognize the snap of a friendly finger and thumb.

The older boy said, "Yes, rather!" and allowed his hand to be enveloped in the priest's. The unknown was no more. The world had steadied itself.

The Abbé Meuvret smiled at the odd expression of eagerness. "You must be as hungry as hunters!" he said. "Come along, and we will all have some breakfast. But first, which of you is which?"

The younger one had his hand all ready, with muscles stiffened for a real man-to-man handshake with this chap who came to the point so satisfactorily. "That's Tom," he said, "and I'm Jack, and I'm ever so hungry. We were seasick all night."

Tom frowned. "Oh, shut up, Jack!" Wouldn't Jack ever have any sense of privacy? He turned to the Abbé. "It wasn't really all night," he said. "Jack exaggerates terribly!"

The old priest not only shook Jack by the hand, however, but clapped him on the shoulder with a laugh. "I guessed as much," he said. "Anyhow, the school is only ten minutes' walk and breakfast will be waiting for us. Now, if you will carry these bags off the boat, I will see that they are taken up by a porter."

On shore a powerful man in brown corduroys touched his hat to the Abbé, fired a rapid sentence at him, shouldered the bags, waited while they were

passed through the Customs, shouldered them again with a leather strap through the handles and went off.

Then Tom fell in on one side of the Abbé and Jack on the other. For a while they had to walk along under the towering ramparts which made a wall all round the city. Soon they came to a huge gateway, the Grande Porte, at the top of which were emblazoned on one side the arms of St. Malo and on the other those of Brittany. Framed by the gateway was the Grande Place, a large open square, with the Hotel de France et de Chateaubriand on the right and a row of lovely, tar-smelling, ship-chandlers' shops on the left. A cobbled street, the Grande Rue, wound uphill from the centre. Just inside the ramparts a clump of chestnut trees made a brilliant splash of green among the browns and reds of walls and roofs.

So they left the harbor behind them and walked into the picture. Immediately their noses were greeted with the kindly smell of roasting coffee, and their eyes with the spectacle of many women, young and old, bare-armed, their hair tied in handkerchiefs, wielding vigorous brooms on both sides of the street down which ran a gurgle of clear water. Their exchange of early morning gossip was shrill and incessant. Many of them interrupted it to call out, *"Bonjour, Monsieur l'Abbé!"* Whereupon Monsieur Meuvret replied, *"Bonjour, Madame!"* gravely removing his shovel hat each time.

The four youthful eyes were popping.

The Abbé edged them away from the sidewalk. "The only safe place is in the middle of the street," he said. "Everybody's an early riser here."

The remark seemed to Jack like an invitation, and he was bursting with questions. He tore his eyes away from the shops and looked up at the Abbé. "What was in those piles of sacks on the docks as we came along? . . . Potatoes? Do they send them to England in those boats? . . . Oh, up to Newfoundland. I know where that is! It's the very top of Canada. My father's been there. . . . Look at that man's shoes! Why are they wooden? . . . Oh, so those are sabots! . . . Why does that water run down both sides of the street? . . . They sweep like that every morning? Great Scott, they're awfully clean, aren't they? And how dark all these people are!"

It was a veritable discharge.

Tom, meanwhile, listened with attention to the information that the Abbé gave out, but, whenever he could get a word in edgeways, pursued his own line of investigation. "How many boys are there in the school? . . . Six hundred! Lord! . . . What sort of lessons are we going to have? . . . What are rhetoric and philosophy? Shall we be able to learn them? . . . It'll be awfully difficult with everything in French, but I think we shall be able to manage pretty soon. . . . No, of course we can't speak, but we've learned an awful lot of grammar. . . . What do the boys do when they've finished school? . . . What's conscription? . . . Why do they have to do that? We don't in England, do we?"

A twinkle of amusement and interest appeared behind the Abbé's glasses. He glanced from one alert face to the other, saw their eyes darting from side to side like swallows and, as he replied to the cross-fire of questions, brought the background of forty years'

experience to the forming of an opinion of his new charges. He summed them up as a man first, — "Likable youngsters!" — and then the schoolmaster in him added, "They ought to get on well here!"

His momentary cogitation was interrupted by a change in Jack's tone. "Is it far now? I'm frightfully hungry!"

The Abbé swung to the right out of the Grande Rue into a much narrower one. "There's the door of the college," he said. "Like most good things in life, including breakfast, it's just ahead of us."

Chapter Two

JUST as Gaul was once divided into three parts, so was the college. There was the Division des Petits, little bits of infants who came scampering in each morning, in peaked caps and black aprons, and were fetched at dusk by hard-worked mothers who were not at all enthusiastic when the long summer holidays arrived. Then came the Division des Moyens, sturdy little urchins, restless of foot and hand, reluctant and inattentive in class; and, finally, the Division des Grands, where many a sprouting moustache was proudly in evidence and where the more precocious gathered at times in snickering groups to rival each other in knowledge of life, — groups, be it added, that were speedily broken up by the ever-watchful *"pion,"* the priest whose turn of duty it was.

In all, the pupils numbered some six hundred, the majority of whom were boarders, sleeping at night in cell-like cubicles, screened by curtains and so designed architecturally that the master at the intersection of the lines of cubicles could command the entire dormitory.

Democracy was the keynote. There were the children of the butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers, much more ignorant of the grammar of their own language than the two English boys; and representatives of every rung of French life, capped and

climaxed by a real live Vicomte, whose harsh Breton name was woven into the tapestry of the history of France.

The immediate destinies of these future conscripts were presided over by some twenty priests, whose ages varied between thirty and seventy.

Into this Gallic hive, like two young zebras introduced into a herd of reindeer, dropped Tom and Jack Ingleside, the one a bare fifteen summers, the other thirteen and a half. They were placed in the Division des Grands, presumably because the older French boys would be more intelligent in their contact with foreigners. After their fashion they were, but, for all their manifestations of adolescence, they were still boys. Many walls and water-closet doors flaunted the chalked slogans *"Vivent les Boers! . . . A bas les Anglais!"* because in a far-distant South Africa, Oom Paul was still bravely but brainlessly proving that international law is nothing but a polite fiction. These slogans, however, were nothing but the parrotlike echo of the feeling of adult, and perhaps envious, France: diamond mines and new colonies have a permanent value, however doubtfully acquired. Juvenile France, as represented by the bigger boys of the Collège de St. Malo, knew nothing of these inner subtleties, but obtained a purely vicarious satisfaction out of the bedaubing of mural space. Had there been any reality behind all the chalking, it is likely that Tom and Jack Ingleside, as representatives, however inadequate, of the race for whose "downing" such public prayer was offered, would have been the victims of a certain hostility. Once or twice a boy did call after them, *"A bas les Anglais!"* but merely with

a mischievous and perfectly friendly grin. And the joke fell quite flat, for the simple reason that neither Tom nor Jack understood at first what *"à bas"* meant, and by the time they did, the French boys were bored with saying it. There were other points to be taken up, far more amusing and satisfying.

The ball was started rolling by a group of three or four, which rapidly became ten or twelve. They gathered around Tom and Jack who were standing in the playground watching the handshaking with surprise and amusement and listening to the terrific babble.

The spokesman was a tall, pimply youth whose name, it developed later, was Paul-Marie Lapostolle. He planted himself in front of the brothers. *"Eh bien!* You are English?" It was the first time in their lives that either boy had ever been addressed in any language but his own. They had heard French pronounced, very badly, by the English masters in their country school but the situation now was not only vastly different but extremely personal. Yet those English masters had builded well, for both boys met the test with knowledge.

Jack nodded. He knew that the answer was *"oui,"* but the actual saying of the word to a boy who was really French, and that in front of Tom, was an impossibility. He nodded, blushing slightly.

Tom was frowning hard, his hands deep in his breeches pockets.

The French boy stroked his moustache, — if a blackish down can be designated by that word. "Is it that you do not speak French?" he said.

This time Jack shook his head.

"B'en, zut alors! . . . But you seem to understand what I say!"

The word *"comprenez"* was easy. Jack nodded again.

"Ah, bon!" said Lapostolle. "What do you call yourselves, both of you?"

It was not without a sense of surprised triumph that Jack found himself understanding most of what this French boy said. So, feeling a little easier, he answered the question. "Jack," he said.

Lapostolle repeated it in his own way. *"Jacques, hein?* That's simple!" He turned to Tom. "And you?"

"Tom."

"Tom? What is that? Tom? Don't recognise that one!"

A laugh went up from the group at his bid for humor, and then a voice from behind said, *"Espèce d'idiot!* It is Thomas!"

It had never occurred to Tom that his own name would have a different sound in French. It didn't seem to fit, to mean the same thing quite. So he shrugged his shoulders and said to Jack, "These chaps are trying to rot us. We'd better look out!"

Lapostolle interrupted. "It is indeed Thomas, *hein?"*

"Oui!" said Jack.

Immediately several hands clapped him on the shoulder. "Ah! There's the little one speaking French! Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!"

Lapostolle grinned and waved his arms for silence. *"Voyons!* We will see if he knows how to roll his r's. . . . Do you know how to roll your r's?"

Tom and Jack looked at each other. There was a certain unease in this catechism. They felt at the same disadvantage as Gulliver, at his first encounter with the Brobdingnagians. The half-circle of grinning faces, with heads peering over shoulders and pressing ever closer, had a queer nightmarish effect. Jack edged nearer to Tom, turned and looked at him. "Did you understand that? I don't know what they're talking about now."

Tom shook his head. "I lost it too, but I'm certain there's a catch in it somewhere. I don't like the look of that pimply chap. He seems to be a sort of cock of the walk."

"Oh, mais dites donc! What are they talking about?"

"Sapristi! They are pulling our legs!"

"Allez-y, Lapostolle!"

Lapostolle needed no urging. *"Ecoutez!"* he spoke slowly. "You can pronounce the letter 'r'? L, m, n, o, p, q, r. . . ."

Neither boy had ever heard it called "air" before, but the meaning was obvious. So Jack, upon whom Lapostolle had fixed his eye, said, *"Oui!"* again.

"Bon!" said the French boy. "Then say *'merde!'* "

A stifled giggle ran over the group, followed by an expectant silence.

"Merde," said Jack quietly.

A howl of laughter went over them. It attracted the attention of the priest on duty, who was talking with a couple of boys in the far corner of the playground. He looked across to see what was going on.

Both Lapostolle's hands were wagging at once. "No! Not 'merde', but 'mer-r-r-de!' "

"Oh, all right!" said Jack, exasperated. "If you want a lot of r's you shall have 'em! Mer-r-r-de!"

This time the laughter was Gargantuan. Some of them danced and clapped their hands in delight, but suddenly the amusement began to be wiped off face after face as if by some magic sponge.

Behind Tom and Jack appeared the priest. There was not a twinkle in his eye. His face was stern and hard. *"Ah, oui!"* he said. "Always the same ones! Lapostolle, Boutet, Vernier, Cochois, I congratulate you! You are already taking advantage of the new boys, eh? Very well! You will do me five hundred lines each before the end of the week, and if you don't give them to me by Saturday, the amount will be doubled. . . . *Allez! Rompez!"*

The priest patted Tom on the shoulder and smiled at them both. *"Méfiez-vous, mes enfants!"* he said and strolled away. The group scattered, melted, with backward looks of reproach on at least four faces.

Tom laughed. "What do you suppose that word meant?"

"Goodness knows!" said Jack. "We shall have to ask Monsieur Meuvret, though. It might be jolly useful to know. It must be pretty bad from the way he lammed into them!"

Tom nodded. "And I was right about Pimples. He's no good." He looked over at him with a prophetic eye. "We shall probably have to hit him one fine day."

Jack glanced quickly at his brother and then across the yard to where Lapostolle was noisily grieving with his cronies in a corner. He felt a sneaking feeling of compassion at the thought of the fate that hung

over his unconscious head; but, after all, if Tom decreed that he must be hit, then he must be hit. There was nothing else for it. "All right," he said. "I'm with you!"

Chapter Three

As far back as Jack could remember it had always been like that. If Tom made a pronunciamento, it was right. Tom had always known everything. He was probably the most tremendously clever chap in the world. If he, Jack, ever started some gigantic undertaking, Tom could always come along, look at it for a minute or two, and then take the lead just as if he had originally planned it all.

There was that time, for instance, when he had begun to work on the Suez Canal and had just got about a third of the way through when Tom had called through the trees and had come running down to the brook at the bottom of the garden.

At the spectacle of the engineering that was under way he whistled. "What are you digging?"

"Don't you see!" said Jack indignantly. "This is the Suez Canal and I'm having terrible trouble with it. The sides keep falling in."

"Oh!" said Tom, and he began to walk round it while Jack leaned on his spade in the three-foot trench. Then all at once he exclaimed, "Look here! We've got to make the canal run downhill a little more, or else we shall get stumped by that bank. And we must have the hollow ready to receive the water when we've built the lock. If we don't it'll just run away and flood that flower bed, and then Mother will be awfully upset."

Jack hadn't thought of the bank or the fate of the flower bed. He never seemed to be able to see things as far ahead as Tom did, but when Tom pointed them out they were obvious.

And so when, after a week, they had dug the Canal and finally let the water run into the hollow and make a pond of it, not only had Mother allowed them to have a tea party on the Mediterranean Shore, but Father, who was a real engineer, had blown clouds of tobacco and nodded at Mother with a smile and said, "Pretty good, eh?"

And it was all because of Tom, even though he never said "I", but always "we."

Then would he ever forget, soon after the Canal tea party, when Father was going away again — he was nearly always away —how Tom had stepped forward and said, "It's all right, Father. You needn't worry about Mother. We'll take care of her while you're gone!" And Father had shaken hands with each of them and said, "Thank you. I was going to ask you to do that for me. I shall rely on you!"

Jack knew that it was a splendid thing for Tom to have said, because when he was following Tom out with another of Father's bags, he heard Mother say, "They are a comfort, bless them! But don't be too long this time, darling! I . . ." and then the door had swung to behind him.

Only once had Jack detected a reluctance — perhaps not a reluctance, just a breath of hesitation — in his brother to leap ahead of him, and that was when the French school had first been proposed. To Jack it had seemed like throwing wide open the doorway to the world. How many hours he had spent on

wet days curled up on the wide window seat in the nursery, poring over the pages of an atlas, tracking down Father in Java or Alaska or India or South America, so that all night he might be able to dream of being in Peshawar, Mindanao, Popocatapetl, Rio de Janeiro . . . "go rolling down to Rio before I'm very old", as Mother sang so magnificently. What things there were to do there! There was the Shah of Persia to see in Bagdad, and Father said they played polo in the streets of Tabriz, all dressed up in gorgeous colors, yellows and reds and greens, and afterwards you sat down with them and drank sherbet and smoked a hubble-bubble. And afterwards you could go tiger shooting with a Rajah who always wore an emerald the size of a hen's egg in the front of his turban. There was a howdah on the elephant's back and he would lift you up into it with his trunk, and then you and the Rajah would sit there with great big guns across your knees while the mahout jabbed the elephant with his ankus and made him go and find the tiger. . . . Just wait till he grew up! Of course there would be Mother to take care of, but if Tom was really going to waste his life in London getting silly old briefs, Mother could stay with him while he went off for a little while like Father.

And then suddenly the thing had happened, without his having to wait to grow up.

It was after tea, and he had washed the jam off his hands and gone into the drawingroom to pick out notes on the piano and make them match like Mother did, specially those deep lovely ones that made you tingle all over. In the middle of it Mother came in and she had a letter in her hand.

"Jack, darling," she said, "come into the next room. I've got something very important to ask you and Tom. You can come back and go on playing afterwards."

There was a sound in Mother's voice that made him get down from the piano stool at once. "Is it something difficult?" he asked.

"Perhaps," said Mother. "You'll see."

So they went into the next room together and there was Tom, deep in the armchair. Mother went over to the sofa, so Jack sat there too.

"I've had a letter from Father," she began.

"Is he still in Japan?" asked Jack.

"Of course," said Tom. "Don't interrupt!"

"I'll read you what he says," Mother went on. She glanced at the first page and turned it over. "Here it is . . . 'I've been thinking a great deal about the boys' future. It seems to me that they are old enough now to step out of that day school down there and begin to make a little outside contact. The trouble with most of us Englishmen is that we're too da . . . I mean too English . . .' "

"What was that word you left out?" interrupted Jack.

Mother smiled. "It was a word that Father and I sometimes use together," she said.

"Oh, shut up, Jack!" said Tom. "Can't you let Mother go on?"

Jack looked sorrowfully at his Mother. "But I only wanted to know!" he said.

"It's all right, darling!" said Mother. She returned to the letter. " 'Most of us cling so desperately to our own back yards that our only knowledge of what is

outside comes to us by way of the newspapers. In other words, it isn't knowledge at all, but the most abysmal ignorance. We don't want the boys to live in such primal darkness, so my idea is that they should start off, now, and get such a grounding in France and Germany, where the only real education exists, that when they are grown up they will have the keys of the world in their hands. I suppose they'd better wind up with Oxford, merely because of its social value to them as Englishmen. It opens doors and so on later, if it does nothing else. But, speaking French and German like natives, and with a perspective on England that will wipe all the insularity out of them, they will be able to get the best out of Oxford and reject all the flummery. If they start now, they will have four years in which to soak in the French and German idea. All you have to do is to write in English to Monsieur l'Abbé Meuvret at the Collège de St. Malo, Brittany. Old Bill Nuttall sent his kids there and swears by it. It's Catholic and run by priests. In some ways so much the better. They'll at least observe, if they don't have to take part in it, a moral discipline stronger than is possessed by any religion I have ever examined. The point needs no stressing. Get Bill to come and see you, and he'll tell you all about it . . .!' "

Mother stopped. In the silent room the folding of the letter seemed very loud.

Tom, frowning deeply, sat with his chin in his hand. Jack, with wide eyes fixed on his mother, was already halfway to Japan. France and Germany! To be speaking French and German! And then later, perhaps he would be able to pick up a little Malay, and Tamil and Hindustani, so that he and Father could talk

them together and no one else would know what they were saying, — not even Tom!

He made a great scramble along the sofa and flung an arm around his mother. "Does that mean . . ." He broke off, almost stuttering with excitement. "Does that mean we're to go to school in France?"

Mother held him, quite tightly. "Would you like to go, Jack?"

"Like to? It's magnificent!" He pulled himself free of the detaining arms, jumped over the hassock and turned a somersault in the middle of the room. "Hooray, we're going to school in France! Hooray, we're going to school in France!"

Mother's fingers were locked in her lap. She turned and looked at Tom. An expression that might have been hope came into her eyes. "What do you say, Tom?" she asked quietly.

Jack broke off his exuberant chant so as not to miss Tom's first enthusiasm. To his infinite surprise Tom didn't enthuse.

"I didn't see the postman to-day," he said. "When did you get that letter, Mother?"

Mother's eyes opened a trifle wider. "Three days ago," she answered.

Tom nodded. "I see! And was that long telephone conversation that you had last night, when I was reading in bed, with Mr. Nuttall?"

This time Mother nodded. What long ears these little pitchers had! Was there any detail of life they missed?

"What did he say about the school?" asked Tom.

Mother smiled. How like Father he was, to go all round the subject before giving his opinion. "Mr.

Nuttall was most enthusiastic. It's a lovely old town with crooked streets, right on the sea. His boys swam all the summer and had a lovely time."

"Oh!" broke in Jack. "How perfectly splendid!"

"That's all right," said Tom. "But did they learn anything?"

"They came back, speaking French like natives," said Mother.

"Of course!" said Jack. "They'd have to unless they were idiots!"

Tom nodded thoughtfully. "Oh, well," he said, "that's something, anyway. I suppose it's all right. After all, Father wouldn't have made the suggestion unless he was sure it was a good one. When do we have to go?"

Jack was staring at his brother. "How extraordinary!" he thought. "Why doesn't he wake up and see it all?"

Mother didn't answer. She got up abruptly and went over to the large vase of flowers that always lived on the mantelpiece. For a moment she fussed with them. Then, without turning, she said, "The first week in September."

"September!" echoed Jack. "Not until September?"

Mother gave a queer little laugh. "That'll come quite soon enough!" she said. She left the mantelpiece and clapped her hands. "Now run away, both of you! I'll sit down, now at once, and write to Monsieur Meuvret while the . . . while the iron's hot!" She shooed them out of the room and shut the door after them. For a breath she stood there. "What fools," she thought, "to think we are so essential. . . . Even my little Jack . . ."

Chapter Four

THE difference in their reactions to the idea of France was translated into their actions during their first weeks there. With everybody except Monsieur Meuvret, who, with the rarest sympathy and understanding, made himself not only friend and protector but most jovial companion, Tom's approach was reluctant, almost grudging. The French boys, after their initial staring curiosity had been gratified, made the friendliest overtures; but instead of crawling out of his racial hole to bask in the sunshine of their interest, Tom withdrew farther and farther into it. The adjustment was slow. During class he was all right. He worked eagerly and the various masters thoroughly approved of him. In the playground, however, he was at first unable to find his feet and either stuck close to Jack or disappeared on the run up to Monsieur Meuvret's room.

There was always a feeling when he stood a little breathless outside the door and heard Monsieur Meuvret's *"Entrez!"* that the pursuit was over; and when he had slipped in and closed the door so that the rest of the school was shut out, he drew a deep breath of relief, and met the friendly eyes behind the glasses with a rush of affection, not unmixed with gratitude.

"Hullo, Tom! Pull up a chair. I was coming to find you presently, to see if you and Jack would like to come out with me this afternoon, instead of marching *'en crocodile'* with the rest of the boys. I'm going

to walk to Paramé to have tea with some English friends. We might have a swim on the way. What do you say?"

Tom didn't have to say anything. His eyes were saying it for him; and so, when the bell began to ring for the next class after the fifteen-minute interval, Monsieur Meuvret would gather up his books and say, "Well, we must go. Bring Jack up here after lunch, and don't forget your bathing suits!"

And then Tom would tear down the stone stairs again, the weight of the world considerably lightened.

There had been times when no *"Entrez!"* replied to his knock and he stood there on the landing, his small soul one vast prayer that the Abbé would come back before the next class, or before he would be discovered by some other master living on the same staircase, who would ask him what he was doing there.

One day things seemed so black that he was staring out of the landing window, fighting back his tears, when Monsieur Meuvret came up two at a time and found him. One look at the boy's face told the story. The Abbé opened the door and pushed Tom inside.

"Look here, *mon ami!*" he said. "You and I don't have to stand on ceremony with each other. Any time I'm not here, just walk in and make yourself at home. The only time I ever lock the door is when I go away from the college during the holidays, and if you're here then, I'll give you the key before I go. Tell Jack that, will you?"

"Thanks most awfully," gulped Tom. "You . . . I . . ." He turned and fled.

There was no need to tell Jack. Jack had made himself at home already. He liked this room, with its queer high bed and the extraordinary feather mattress that let you sink down about a mile into it; and he was perfectly fascinated to watch Monsieur Meuvret shave, standing in front of a six-inch mirror that made your face look all funny, dipping his brush from time to time in the infinitesimal trickle of cold water that ran out of a tap in the copper tank which hung on a nail in the wall. It dripped into a sort of copper tray hanging underneath it and the tray had a hole in the bottom which let the water empty itself into a bucket on the floor. There was no other washing appliance in the room and it was perfectly wonderful not to be told every time to go back and wash behind your ears. And then the fireplace wasn't really a fireplace at all. It had a jolly little round iron stove called a "bee" sticking out into the room, and the stove-pipe went up the chimney. It was altogether a splendid room, a sort of fortress, and Monsieur Meuvret could keep anything he liked in it and nobody would ever know except Tom and himself, and of course they would keep it a secret.

Whenever he had spent his last centime but one, and there was no more pocket money coming for a whole week, he would go dashing up to that friendly room, plant himself in front of the priest with the most ingratiating smile and say, "Will you toss me for pennies? Look, I've got just one left!"

"Only one? But suppose you lose it?"

"Then we sha'n't be able to play any more. But you know how lucky I am!"

Monsieur Meuvret's eyes would twinkle. "Indeed I do! . . . All right, I'll play."

Whereupon Jack would delightedly spin his coin, saying, "Heads I win. Tails you lose. Which is it?"

"Heads!"

Jack opened his hand and peered. "Heads it is! I win! . . . Now, what is it this time?"

"I'll try tails this time."

"All right . . . It is tails! You lose. That makes twopence you owe me!"

And Monsieur Meuvret, pretending that he didn't see through it, would proceed to lose half a franc, to the infinite joy of Jack, who fully believed that he was fooling the priest.

He also loved the tea parties at Paramé, and the swim beforehand, when he and Tom and Monsieur Meuvret would all undress behind the rocks, with a large bag of "fly-biscuits" to eat afterwards — it didn't make any difference that a huge tea was to follow — and then go diving into one curling wave after another on a sandy beach that oozed up between your toes when you stood in the suck of the receding water.

Their first swim together settled a knotty problem.

Both Tom and Jack had noticed, with a certain embarrassment, that when he walked Monsieur Meuvret made a funny noise with every step. It was so weird and so noticeable that Jack was bursting with curiosity. At the first opportunity he nudged Tom and said under his breath, "I say! Why does he make that squelching noise?"

Tom grinned and said, "Isn't it extraordinary?"

"Do you suppose it's his tummy?" queried Jack. "Like the collywobbles in church in the early morning?"

"I've been wondering," said Tom. "Perhaps he's got some disease. I'd love to ask him about it, but of course we can't."

And so as they walked they looked at the Abbé wonderingly, a little pityingly, and with great sympathy because he was such an awfully decent sort and it was hard luck. Then when they left all the little villas behind, and the Casino and the hotel, they all climbed down the high headland outside Paramé on to the golden sand of what was to become their favorite bathing place, Monsieur Meuvret took off his shovel hat and dropped it on to a rock. "Now, boys," he said, "I'll race you into the water!" And with incredible speed he began the unbuttoning of the sixty or seventy buttons of his soutane.

Both boys became a little self-conscious. There was something so womanly about those skirts. Would Monsieur Meuvret look like Father underneath? They watched him out of the corner of their eyes, breathless, fascinated.

The last button came undone and the soutane was dropped on to the sand. The Abbé was revealed in a shirt and a pair of corduroy breeches, stockings and boots. "Heavens, how slow you are!" he said.

Both boys were gazing at him, spellbound, relieved and, in an unexplainable way, glad to find that there was nothing mysterious about him after all; that even though he was a priest, he was just an ordinary man too. When, finally, he walked towards the sea in his swimming suit, Jack noticed that he didn't squelch

any more. The noise had entirely disappeared. He was as silent as they were. It was uncanny.

All the time they were swimming, Jack worried about it. At last, when they had all dried, and he and Tom were nibbling "fly biscuits" as they dressed, Monsieur Meuvret lit a cigarette and began to stroll about in his corduroys. There was the squelch again!

Jack watched. If he stood still there was no squelch. If he moved the squelch began. He went on watching, — and suddenly said in an excited whisper to Tom, "I've discovered it! It isn't a disease."

"What isn't?"

"The squelch!"

"Oh! . . . Then what is it?"

"It's his breeches . . . the corduroys!"

"His breeches! . . . Why, of course! Great Scott, I'm glad; aren't you?"

"Rather!" said Jack, and then the thought of tea at the house in the village made him begin to hurry into his uniform.

From the very first day it was obvious that there were few inhibitions about Jack. He took to the new life as a duck takes to water and, once he had got over his momentary shyness, which was mostly because of Tom, plunged into the new uniform, the new language and the necessary gestures with complete unselfconsciousness.

The uniform, worn by every boy in the school except the infants, consisted of navy blue jacket, double-breasted with brass buttons and epaulettes, long trousers, and a sort of yachting cap, dark blue with a shiny black peak. When each "division" was out walking *"en crocodile"* — three abreast in a long line —

they looked like a parade of miniature naval officers.

Psychologically that uniform was of great significance. Perhaps without being aware of it, the French boys had been intrigued as much by their English clothes as by the fact that they were English. Once the uniforms had been assumed, however, their personalities had become submerged in that of the group. They belonged, having surrendered all external differences; and immediately a sense of camaraderie took the place of curiosity.

Feeling this intuitively, Jack took full advantage of it. Starting with the boy at the next desk, to whom, wide-eyed, he displayed one by one all the English treasures that he had brought from home — catapult, compass, pencil box, jackknife with corkscrew and spike for removing stones from horses' feet — his circle of acquaintance spread in ever-widening rings. Within a fortnight he was wagging a hand and saying, *"Eh b'en, mon vieux!"* and *"Oh, mais dites donc!"* as if he had never heard of a place called England.

Three of the boys soon became close friends. One was a laughter-loving lad called Jean-Marie Kerouec, almost as blue-eyed as Jack himself, strong and agile, a Malouin, whose father was one of a long line of sea captains. One day Jean-Marie was going to be one himself. That fact alone was sufficient to endear him to Jack.

The second of Jack's circle was going to become a priest, — a piece of knowledge which Jack worried as a bull pup worries an old shoe. His "why's" were like a recurring decimal. He was a spectacled fervent youth, both in chapel and out. He wore his hair *"en*

brosse" — a style at that time extremely popular — and answered to the name of Hippolyte Thibault. His home was in Quimper, a considerable way down the coast, and his father was a cider merchant *"en gros et en detail."* Jack frequently sat next to him in class and liked him because Hippolyte was always ready to whisper the right answer to him when he was stumped by a sudden question from the *"pion."* And then, too, in the playground, he asked a thousand questions about England, which gave Jack a chance to display his own knowledge, — a chance that had rarely come to him in so complete a form. He indulged his imagination to the full.

The last of the three came from the Vendée. His name was Marcel Bourné. To look at he might have been a red Indian, with a clean aquiline nose and chin, ink-black hair and eyes to match. Their friendship started one Sunday when Tom and Jack were playing a game of chess. Bourné came over and sat down without a word to watch. After an appreciable time Tom advanced a knight and muttered, "Check!"

Jack took the knight with a bishop: whereupon Tom came crashing down with his queen and said, "Mate!"

"Oh, golly!" cried Jack. "I ought to have seen it!"

Bourné looked from one to the other. "Is it over?" he asked. Jack nodded.

"What do you call the game?" asked Bourné.

"Chess," said Jack. "Do you play?"

"Of course he doesn't!" said Tom. "Otherwise he wouldn't have asked you what the game is!"

Bourné smiled. "I've never seen it before. It looks very interesting."

"It is!" said Jack. "My father taught us. He's a very good player. And so's my brother. He nearly always beats me!"

"That's nothing!" said Tom quickly, his eye on Bourné. "For his age he's really better than I am."

Bourné smiled. "I wonder if you'd teach me sometime?"

Tom gave him a searching look and then, apparently satisfied, said, "We'll show you the moves now if you like!"

Jack got up. "Look, you sit down here. You'll see much better how the pieces go."

For an hour the three worked at the game. At the end they shook hands, and from that time on were Marcel, Jacques and Thomas.

Chapter Five

WHILE all his pores were open to absorb the exciting atmosphere of this new world, Jack became worryingly aware that Tom was not sharing it with him, had somehow not caught the spirit of it all.

If Father in Japan could have observed the boy's immediate response he would have known that his experiment was justified.

The memory of Tom's reluctance when the news of the school was first broken to them came back to him, and, like a bird in full flight, he wheeled and came swooping back to see what was the matter. It was nothing tangible, like a battered knee, nothing that he could even ask about directly; but it was as evident as a sore thumb that Tom wasn't happy. "Golly!" said Jack, and, with a bewildering sense that for the first time he was the leader, that in some way he was older than Tom in his dealings with people and that therefore it was up to him to take hold, he renounced the thousand and one occupations that clamored for his attention and stayed with his brother.

"Do you see that chap standing just behind the *'pion'?* The one with fair hair and his cap all sideways? He's awfully decent. His name's Jean Kerouec and he's promised to take us down to his father's ship next time she comes in. Let's go and talk to him."

Tom shook his head, frowning. "Not now. The

bell will ring in a minute. . . . Think old Meuvret will take us to Paramé on Thursday?"

"Let's ask him!" said Jack eagerly. "It's only Tuesday to-day, and if we catch him on the hop he won't have had time to arrange anything else. Let's dash up and see if he's there. The *'pion's'* not looking!"

Again Tom shook his head miserably. "I've been up. He's not there."

"Oh, well," said Jack with great cheeriness, "we'll nab him after *déjeuner*. He wouldn't miss *déjeuner* for anything! By the way, it's beans to-day! Isn't that grand! I think they're ripping, don't you?"

"They're all right," sniffed Tom. "Thank goodness we won't have that beastly stew for another seven days!"

"Oh, it's not so bad," said Jack. "It makes you feel full, anyway; specially when you use the last of your bread to mop up the gravy. How shocked Mother will be when we do that at home!" He laughed.

But instead of laughing too, Tom turned on him savagely. "Great Scott, why don't you shut your jaw!"

Jack was glad that at that moment the bell rang. It was hard to cozen Tom out of his mood. You could only play chess on Sundays, and even then it was pretty hard to get beaten every single time. In England there were cricket and football on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, and at home a million things to make and places to go to. But here there was no workshop, with shining rows of saws, hammers and nails; and if you weren't in study or classroom you had to be in the playground, where games

were unheard of. Some of the boys played "touch," but, good heavens, they'd outgrown that! And then there was that funny gambling game with the small wooden skittle on which each player put a sou, and then you took turns to knock it down with a flat heavy metal disc. But that wasn't really a game. For the rest, the only thing you could do was to stand around and talk to Marcel or Jean and find out all about them, but Tom didn't seem interested in that. He preferred to sneak out when the *"pion"* wasn't looking and bury himself in old Meuvret's room. That was fine when Monsieur Meuvret was there, but it was much more fun in the playground when he wasn't.

The weekly half-holiday was on Thursday afternoon, and then, if Monsieur Meuvret didn't take them off with him, the routine demanded that they form up in a long crocodile and march through the town and out into the straight white country roads with the magpies flying on ahead from field to field, or, which was infinitely preferable, along the rocky seashore.

Sometimes you could make an unobserved dash into a shop and buy apples and gingerbread; and then, even if you were seen coming back and given a hundred lines by the *"pion"*, at least you had something to eat! Moreover, at the midway break when everybody sprawled on their back on the sand or the grass, and the old *"pion"* marched up and down, reading his breviary, it was immensely exciting sometimes to get in with the older boys and smoke cigarettes, dissimulating them under your hand so that the *"pion"* shouldn't see. Some of them even had complete outfits of pipe and tobacco pouch! That was wonder-

ful! . . . What on earth was keeping Tom from living all this?

In spite of all Jack's efforts, the turning point in the period of depression was not reached until Tom's prophecy about having to hit Lapostolle was fulfilled.

They had stopped on the seashore during a Thursday afternoon walk. Instead of going off with Marcel or Jean Kerouec, Jack, still feeling his responsibility, sat down with Tom to eat gingerbread purchased surreptitiously on the way out. Suddenly, from behind, a handful of sand struck Tom's neck.

Both boys swung round to see Lapostolle grinning at them a few feet away.

"Oh, mais dites donc!" said Tom.

Lapostolle went on grinning and flung another double handful. It struck not only Tom's head and neck, but the gingerbread, making it completely uneatable.

Without a word, but with a face as white as a sheet, Tom sprang up and ran at Lapostolle.

The French boy was older and taller, but the expression on Tom's face was such that an immediate withdrawal seemed not only wise but urgent. He leaped up and began to run, pursued equally by Tom and the jeers of the group around. Before he had gone ten paces Tom caught up with him, stuck out a foot and sent Lapostolle sprawling on his face. In a flash Tom dropped upon him and, holding him down by the nape of his neck with one hand, with the other shovelled sand into Lapostolle's mouth, eyes, neck, and hair.

The *"pion"* was far away, buried in his breviary.

Jack, watching, his heart pounding with excitement at the spectacle of his brother in battle, and not quite knowing whether he should get into it or not, yelled "Hooray!" at the neatness of the trip; and then, "Give it to him, Tom! That's the way!" It served the fellow right. Not only had he been warned, but he had ruined the gingerbread, and gingerbread was few and far between.

But after a moment or two, the excitement all went out of it and Jack felt queerly sick. Tom wouldn't stop! and Lapostolle was really beginning to choke!

Shouts of warning, almost of horror, began to go up from the group.

Jack ran over to his brother and caught his arm. "Hi! Chuck it, Tom!" he cried. "He's had enough! Let him go!"

Tom glared over his shoulder. *"Fichez-moi la paix!*. . . Oh, it's you! What did you say? . . . Great Scott!" He looked down at the mess under him and jumped to his feet. "Good lord! What have I done?"

Lapostolle stayed there, blubbering with fright, gagging and half blinded. Tom dragged him up, dusted him off, lent him a handkerchief, saying all the time in French, "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. You enraged me. I didn't mean to hurt you. . . ."

Jack pulled him away. "Come on," he said. "Leave him alone!" And when they were some paces away he went on in a low, almost awed voice. "What on earth happened? Why did you half kill him like that?"

Tom's hands were still trembling with the violence of his emotion. "I don't know," he said. "It was just as if some one had pulled a trigger in me. I hated him

and the school and the whole thing, and once I had got him down I had to pay them all back! . . . Extraordinary, wasn't it? Thank heaven you came up when you did!" After a moment he gave a choky laugh. "All the same, it's funny!"

"Funny?" echoed Jack. "I should like to know what's funny about it?"

"Why," said Tom, "I don't hate the place any more. I feel fine!"

Jack stared at him, bewildered and a little exasperated that none of his own efforts had succeeded in making Tom feel like that. "Oh, you do, do you?" he said.

"Absolutely!" said Tom.

"Then all I've got to say," glared Jack, "is that you're a perfect fool! The place is just the same, isn't it? It's simply that you were ass enough to go and get down in the dumps about nothing at all!"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom. "You don't know anything about it. Don't talk piffle! . . . Here!" He pulled a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket.

Jack gasped. He'd never owned any cigarettes, and here was Tom with a private hoard of them. It was just like him! "Where did you get them?"

"Bought 'em, fathead!" laughed Tom. "Come on! Let's sit down and smoke. . . . Wait a second, though. I'll just go and see if that idiot Lapostolle'd like one."

Chapter Six

ALTHOUGH the college was Catholic, religion was not thrust upon the English boys. The only thing that was required of them was to be present at early morning chapel, and that because at seven o'clock there was no other place for them conveniently to go. On Sundays they could attend High Mass or not, as they liked. More frequently than not they went, principally because of the organ and the singing.

When they didn't, it was presumed that they were either in the empty study or in Monsieur Meuvret's room. The presumption, however, was far from the fact. Jack had once acquired a pass key from Monsieur Meuvret; but, having discovered that the key would open any door in the college, he had deliberately failed to return it. "After all," he said to Tom, "old Meuvret has another, and we really need this one. If you want to know why, follow me and I'll show you!"

From the distant chapel came the drowsy chanting of responses. The two boys left the study, and Tom followed Jack up several flights of stairs to the very top of the college. It was so still and yet so full of potential life behind those rows of closed doors where all the *"pions"* lived, that they went on tiptoe. The probabilities were that they were all at Mass, but you never could tell. All the doors had numbers except one. At this one Jack stopped, and with infinite precaution opened it with the pass key.

"Look!" he whispered in the tone of an Aladdin at the mouth of the cave.

Tom saw a billiard table in the middle of a large room, with cues and balls in a rack on the wall. Several chairs were grouped in the corner by the window around a harmonium. "By Jove!" he whispered.

They went quickly in and closed the door.

"This is grand!" said Tom. "Let's have a game! . . . Hullo! There aren't any pockets on the table! How perfectly absurd!"

"I know!" said Jack. "It's French billiards! All you can score is cannons. Don't you remember Father telling us about it?"

Tom nodded. "Yes, I do now. I suppose this is a recreation room for the *'pions.'* Well, it's ours too from now on. We'll never give that key back!"

Jack laughed excitedly. "You do a little practising," he said. "I want to see if that harmonium works. This is the chance of a lifetime!"

"Go ahead," said Tom. "I'll get my eye in. Gosh, doesn't it seem years since we rigged up the table at home?"

Jack's eyes sparkled as he found that the harmonium was not locked. He pulled up a chair and sat down, pumped for a moment with his feet and then laid his fingers on a chord. It played! His fingers came off again, as if they'd been bitten. "What a frightful row it makes! Do you think it'll bring the whole college up here?"

Tom was busily chalking a large and unwieldly cue. "Oh, rats!" he said. "They're all in chapel. You can make all the row you want."

Thus reassured, Jack, who had never sat down at

a harmonium before in his life, fell upon the stops with fervent glee: tremolo, vox humana, roman pipe, all came out together to make an orgy of sound. Three fingers with the right hand and one with the left were all that he could use, but with them he could play quite a number of simple tunes. His musical frenzy drowned the crack of the billiard balls, — drowned also the quiet turning of another key in the locked door and the equally quiet opening thereof.

It was Tom who, walking round the table to make another shot, suddenly looked up into the eyes of the Abbé de Rohan, who every morning from nine to ten took the class in French grammar and recitation.

After Monsieur Meuvret, the Abbé de Rohan was the most popular priest in the college, — much younger, in his early thirties, with very blue eyes and very blue chin, and hands whose backs were covered with hair like a monkey's. But he was always laughing and joking, and somehow the funny things he said about the grammar made it awfully easy to remember the irregular verbs.

As he caught Tom's eye, the Abbé put a finger to his lips and then made signs that Tom should go on playing.

Not without wonder, Tom did so. And without the slightest suspicion that he had an audience, Jack went on with his musical programme.

For perhaps five minutes the Abbé de Rohan stood listening. Then, as Jack held the final chord of a tune, he clapped his hands and walked over. "Bravo, Jacques!" he said. "I didn't know you were a musician!"

Sheer habit made Jack say, *"Bonjour, Monsieur*

l'Abbé!" but he could hardly get it out for the confusion and dismay that wrung him.

"Don't get up," said the Abbé. "Play me something else."

Jack shook his head. "I don't know how to play," he said. "I . . . I was just making noises."

Monsieur de Rohan laughed. "Well, where did you learn to make noises?"

"At home," said Jack.

"Your mother taught you?"

"No. I just tried to pick out the notes, that's all."

The Abbé nodded. "And do you sing?"

Jack felt himself getting redder. "No!" he said.

Tom promptly dug him in the ribs. "Don't be an idiot!" he said in rapid English. "Sing to him and he'll forget to ask us for the key!" And then in French to the Abbé he went on, "He can sing, Monsieur! He knows 'Au Clair de la Lune'."

"Alors!" said the Abbé. He sat down at the instrument and adjusted the stops. Then very softly he began to play the old melody. Jack remained silent. "Very well!" smiled the Abbé. "I will sing the first verse, but you must sing the second!"

Perhaps his voice was the Abbé's one sin. He had a rich and mellow baritone and he loved it, and into it he poured all the emotion that as a priest he could not pour into anything else. He sang the ballad now so that the boy standing at his shoulder tingled with delight, the possible confiscation of the key entirely forgotten.

"Au clair de la lune
Mon ami Pierrot
Prête-moi ta plume

Pour écrire un mot.
Ma chandelle est morte,
Je n'ai plus de feu.
Ouvre-moi ta porte
Pour l'amour de Dieu!"

Without pause he swung into the second verse, raising one eyebrow at Jack; and, before he knew that he was doing it, Jack found himself singing.

"Au clair de la lune
Pierrot répondit
Je n'ai pas de plume
Je suis dans mon lit. . . ."

He forgot the words at the swing down into the other key, and so repeated the first four lines, which brought him to the end of the melody.

The Abbé did not know that it was the first time Jack had ever opened his mouth in song, except in the garden all by himself. He glanced at the boy's flushed face and nodded approvingly. "Good!" he said. "Do you know this one?

"Frère Jacques
Dormez-vous?
Sonnez les matines!
Sonnez les matines!
Frère Jacques . . .

"No? Then how about this?

"Dans les prisons de Nantes
Il y a un prisonnier,
Que personne n'y va voire
Que la fille du geôlier.

Que personne n'y va voire
Que la fille du geôlier.
Va lui porter à boire
A boire et à manger. . . ."

He gave the song in all its verses, the harmonium pealing out the joy bells at the end.

"Oh!" said Jack, his whole body vibrating with it, "that's magnificent! I do wish you would sing that one again!"

It is doubtful if the Abbé had ever sung to a more sympathetic audience. Both boys stood there motionless, Tom leaning on his cue like a lance at rest, Jack carried far beyond the person of Monsieur de Rohan to the voice itself and the plaint of the song.

At the end, the Abbé swung round on the chair with a laugh. *"Voilà!"* he said. "That's the end of the concert. . . . So you like music, eh? And what about you, Thomas? Don't you 'make noises' too?"

Tom shook his head. "I love to hear them, but the mere idea of trying to make them myself never entered my head. Mother and Jack are the musicians of the family."

The Abbé's eyes went back to the younger boy. He nodded. "So you've never been taught?"

"No," said Jack.

"Would you like to learn?"

Jack's eyes widened. "Do you think I really could?"

"You could," said the Abbé, "if you worked very hard and practised a great deal."

Jack grinned. "I don't call music work! Work is having to do something that isn't interesting, — like lessons!"

The Abbé laughed. "You're perfectly right, *mon ami!* And therefore the only way to avoid work in this world is to be interested in everything, *n'est-ce pas?* Even lessons!" He pulled out his watch. "Mass

is over. I think you'd better run down now, before the *'pion'* begins to wonder where you are. Otherwise he might ask some awkward questions, don't you think?" His eyes twinkled. "And meanwhile, I will see Monsieur Meuvret at lunch and discuss your music with him."

"You will!" said Jack. "Oh . . ."

"Bonjour, Monsieur l'Abbé!" interrupted Tom, tugging Jack's sleeve and heading rapidly for the door. Once outside he began to run down the stairs, beckoning Jack to hurry. At the bottom, breathless, he waited for his brother. "Now aren't you jolly glad you sang? You might have spoiled the whole thing! He knew we must have got in with a key, and he never said a word! Pretty brainy, I call that!"

Jack nodded with far-away eyes. Perhaps for the first time he failed in proper homage towards his brother. "Just think of it!" he said. "He's going to teach me music!"

Chapter Seven

THE warmth of the evening study was beautifully somnolescent. It was produced simply by the confinement of some seventy human bodies within a given cubic space.

From the high desk at the top of the room where he was correcting exercises, the *"pion"* glanced down from time to time with a practised eye upon the rows of bent heads inclined at the proper angle over textbooks. The silence of attention, made up of the rustle of pages being turned, sniffings and breathings, slurrings of feet, scratchings of pens, told him that the class was behaving in all respects as it should behave.

Under cover of the group quiet, however, a hundred personalities were expressing themselves. Deception was raised to a fine art; and, with it, those sister arts, cunning and furtiveness. Had he looked, or cared to look, closer, the *"pion"* would have remarked one boy writing out a punishment of five hundred lines with three pens tied together so that he was accomplishing three lines at once. Another had a novel superimposed exactly on his textbook. Another, with a piece of elastic tied to his first and second fingers, was shooting tightly twisted bullets of paper with extraordinary muzzle velocity, albeit with indifferent precision, at any profile that suggested a target. Sticky sweets were silently exhumed from desks and, properly directed in a piece of paper, made their

watched way from bench to bench to far distant destinations in various parts of the room. Occasionally they were seen to fall into dishonest hands and be popped, with a grin of ridicule and triumph, into improper mouths. Then there followed much pantomiming of threat and future chastisement.

A wad of paper landed with a soft thud on Tom's desk. Without looking up, his hand immediately covered it from possible view by the *"pion."* Fully aware of the social obligation which might require him to act as postman and pass it onward towards its ultimate destination in the same manner in which he had received it, Tom looked at the name on it. It was his own. He unfolded it and read: "What are you and Jacques doing at Christmas? You know that we have a fortnight's holiday, and if you would like to come, I will write to my father and ask him to invite you home. Throw me an answer. Marcel Bourné."

Christmas? Something like a pang shot through Tom at the appalling thought that Christmas might catch them before Jack and himself could get home. Why hadn't he thought before? It was ridiculous that it could be Christmas already. It was only the other day that they landed. Time had been unmarked except by the school bell which pried them loose from sleep morning after morning at five-thirty. The days had passed with the rapidity of lantern slides, and now Christmas was just a week away. Good lord, how long it was since they had landed! Four whole months! How frightfully different everything would be at home! Some time ago Mother had written that Father was on his way back from Japan. Thank goodness for that; but, meanwhile, they must hurry!

He glanced at Jack and, seeing that he was quietly sleeping with his head propped on both hands, dug him in the ribs.

Jack woke with practised quiet, his first glance in the direction of the *"pion."* Then he raised an interrogative eyebrow at Tom.

"Read this!" whispered Tom.

Jack took the note and read it. "How perfectly ripping! Ever since we read 'Chouans et Bleus' I've wanted to go down into the Vendée; and Marcel says that they have an enormous place with horses to ride, and at Christmas time all their people come up and play the *'vielle'* and sing choruses and drink barrels of cider!"

"That's all right!" grunted Tom. "But how about going home?"

"Home? . . . Gosh, why, of course! I hadn't thought of that!" Jack scratched his head thoughtfully. "Can we go home? Are we going home?"

Tom was frowning. "Seems funny that we haven't heard from Mother about it. Think we'd better write?"

"Yes, rather!" said Jack. "You write now and post it to-night, and I'll answer Marcel's note. I'll say we don't know yet, but that we'd love to come if we don't go to England. How's that?"

Tom raised the lid of his desk, and from its many contents that were arranged with mathematical precision, produced a sheet of thin note paper and an envelope.

"Eh bien, Thomas! What are you doing there, you?"

It was as though a gimlet had drilled through the

silence of the room. Every eye turned to Tom, who looked up, startled, at the *"pion."*

"Nothing, Monsieur!" One always said "nothing" to that ridiculous question from the person in authority.

"And that letter paper? Have you no work to do?"

"I have finished my exercise, Monsieur," said Tom.

"And so you can think of nothing better to do than write, eh?"

The sarcasm was intended to be withering. It did produce a snicker or two. "Very well, you will write me a hundred times 'I must not waste my time in class', and give them to me at the end of study."

Tom shrugged his shoulders. *"Bien, Monsieur!"*

Jack sent the priest a murderous glance. *"Sacré voyou de pion!"* he muttered; and, opening his desk at the imminent risk of being catechised himself, produced a triple pen that he had manufactured by means of elastic bands and pieces of string, — somewhat unwieldly, but vastly effective in the hour of calamity. He passed it under the desk to his brother. "Here!" he whispered.

With the cost of labor thus reduced, Tom wrote first to his mother. In the middle of it, he turned to Jack. "Shall I tell her of your great surprise, — your music, you know?"

"Yes, but don't tell her what it is!"

"Idiot!" said Tom. "It wouldn't be a surprise any more if I did, would it?"

"All right, clever!" whispered Jack. "But don't you give it away, that's all!"

The music, at which he had been working every day since the concert with Monsieur de Rohan, was

his devouring passion. He went at it as a hungry man goes at food. Out of his desire and concentration, the old system of three fingers with the right hand and one with the left was a thing of the past. He had begun to use all ten; and it was no longer a fumbling matter of "finding notes that matched." He had already learned to play from music *"Dans les prisons de Nantes, il y a un prisonnier . . ."* That was the great surprise for Mother. It was all planned out. He was going to wait till after tea and then persuade Mother to sing. And then, when she had sung all the old favorites, he was going to say casually, "By the way, do you know this?" And then he would produce the sheet of music and put it on the piano and sit down on the piano stool and play and sing it for her in French. And it was so beautiful that Mother would want to hear it all over again from the beginning. . . .

"Jacques! You will do me a hundred lines for sitting there grinning into space!"

Like a rifle bullet the voice of the *"pion"* picked him off in the clouds.

And as the silence closed down again, Tom passed him back the triple pen.

Chapter Eight

THREE days later they received the reply from home. It was given to them as usual in the playground; and, as usual, they ran with it up to Monsieur Meuvret's room. Tom opened it and Jack read it over his shoulder.

"Here's the Christmas part!" said Tom.

"Wait a minute!" said Jack. "I'm not there yet. . . . 'Now as to Christmas . . .' All right. You can turn over."

Tom turned the page.

"I haven't written to you before about it because I wasn't quite sure how things would work out. But now everything's arranged and you're going to have a great surprise! Just hold your horses a day or two longer after you receive this letter and you'll get a telegram from me which I know will delight both your hearts. I'm dying to see you and it will be very, very soon now.

"With lots of love and many kisses to you both,

"MOTHER."

The two boys looked at each other, — Jack ensnared by the facts of the surprise and the telegram, Tom frowningly trying to read between the lines.

"By Jove!" said Jack. "I hope the telegram comes when we're in class. It'll be so terrifically exciting. . . . It might come this morning, too, because the letter has taken two days."

"Do you know what I think?" said Tom.

Just as a knee jerks when hit, Jack made the customary answer.

"No. What?"

"I think," said Tom, "that we're not going home for Christmas."

"Why not?"

"Two reasons. First, it wouldn't be a surprise, — that is, not a great surprise in the way Mother means. And second, it wouldn't be worth a telegram, anyhow."

Jack nodded violently. *"Sapristi!"* he said. "I believe you're right. Then, what?"

Tom looked at him. "What do you think?"

"Can't imagine!" said Jack.

"Well," said Tom, with a touch of drama, "I think it's got something to do with Father!"

"With Father?"

"Yes. How long ago was it that we heard he was on his way home? It doesn't take forever to come from Japan! I think Father and Mother are both coming here for Christmas. That would be a great surprise, wouldn't it?"

Jack whistled, his eyes wide with admiration.

Tom followed up his triumph rapidly. "You see, if Father's home, he'd naturally want to take a look at this school. It was his idea in the first place. And what's a journey to St. Malo to a man like him? And then Mother says that she wasn't sure how things would work out, which must mean that she wasn't sure whether Father would arrive in time. Don't you see? I'll bet the telegram'll say they're coming!"

To Jack the chain of reasoning was irresistible. No wonder Tom took an awful lot of beating at chess!

With subtle but quite unconscious flattery, Jack went on from the point at which Tom had left it. "When d' you suppose they'll come? Shall we be able to go down and meet them by ourselves at the boat? Won't it be perfectly splendid to hear Father talking French to Monsieur Meuvret and Monsieur de Rohan! Oh, I do hope Monsieur de Rohan will sing for Mother! Wouldn't that be grand!"

Tom nodded and went on, apparently dismissing Jack's enthusiasm as being entirely secondary to his own rôle of expositor, but there was a betraying gleam of excitement in his eyes. "They'll stay at the Hotel de France et de Chateaubriand, of course, and we'll go down there for Christmas dinner. Unfortunately there won't be any turkey or plum pudding. I'll have to explain to Father that they don't eat those things here, but we'll take Mother into the *patisserie* in the Grande Rue and make her buy up the place instead."

"You jolly well bet we will!" said Jack. "One of those enormous chocolate cakes all built up . . . Oh, golly!" How many times he had flattened his nose against the window, coveting that cake.

"Of course," said Tom judicially, "it all depends on how long they stay. I saw old Meuvret this morning for a moment after chapel and when I asked him what was going to become of us when the school breaks up, he looked mysterious and then said that we should eat at the same table with the priests and that we should be allowed to go out by ourselves all day, because we had such high marks for behaviour. What do you think of that?"

"Good lord!" said Jack, almost in a whisper. He was overwhelmed by the vistas of unending joy that

opened up, of being free to stop at every single shop window in every street instead of having to march past *"en crocodile"* with backward glances of longing; of being able to take Father and show him those lovely ship-chandlers and perhaps buy a block and tackle, just a little one, to keep in his desk. It would be so lovely to have, and there were a million things that could be done with it.

"I say!" he burst out. "Let's borrow some money from old Meuvret and get permission to go out and buy Christmas presents for Mother and Father!"

Tom looked at his brother with warm approval. "That," he said, "is a brain wave! They'll have the surprise then! Come on, let's go and find him!"

They jammed on their peaked caps, opened the door and came out on the landing. From below there mounted the sound of feet on the stairs, and voices. For one pounding heartbeat the boys stared at each other and then tore down, neck and neck, telegram forgotten, presents forgotten.

The Abbé Meuvret stepped to one side. "Ah, I thought so!" he said. But nobody noticed him.

At the sight of her two boys in uniform Mother gave a choky laugh and Father said loudly, "Well! Well!" and opened his arms wide.

Chapter Nine

THE jollification lasted a week, at high pressure; and each one of the quartet hoarded away a different nugget of that pure gold of impression which, in after years, works its way to the surface and makes one exclaim, "Do you remember . . . ?"

Mother's was more a fusion than an actual nugget. She took away no outstanding episode, no high point of incident, but a deep sense of being an integral part of a period of serene happiness. They were all four together, she and her three men, not only well but radiant and achieving things; and whatever happened afterwards could not take that away. It was hers forever.

Father summed his up on the boat to Southampton, whence he would catch another boat to go back to Japan. "My dear," he said — they were walking the deck arm in arm in the teeth of a stiff nor'easter — "we may congratulate ourselves on having had the courage of our convictions!"

"Your convictions, you mean!" said Mother, with a laugh that was tossed overboard by the wind.

"Not wholly," said Father. "I know it was damned hard for you to have all of us away at once, but you backed me up like a real sportsman; and the results are worth it! Did you ever see two more upstanding youngsters in your life? Tom's mind is beginning to work like a well-oiled machine, and Monsieur Meu-

vret told me that he simply eats up the various classes. Every paper he does gets over ninety. And that in French! Incidentally, what a remarkable old chap Monsieur Meuvret is! No wonder the boys love him!"

Mother nodded, her mind still on Tom. "He has filled out too. They both have."

Father made the transition with practised ease. "Yes," he said, "neither of them is exactly a sissie. By the time they get to Oxford they'll be in the heavyweight class! But the most important thing is that at the moment they're really French! I watched them, Jack particularly, when they brought up that nice lad and introduced him to us, Bourné, I think his name was. They not only think in French, but they aren't frozen-faced any more. Their features move as they talk. They're alive and interested. I believe they've escaped the curse of public-school boredom and blaséness, that awful fetich which makes conversation consist of 'No!', 'Really?', 'You don't say so!' It's a habit which makes us hated by every other race; and it's impenetrable, not only from without, which is calamitous, but from within, which is pure tragedy!"

"I'm willing to grant all that," said Mother; "but you've got to admit that neither Tom nor Jack was frozen-faced, as you call it, or tongue-tied, before they came to France."

"No," said Father, "but they would have been if we'd been slack enough not to bother and just let them go through the old sausage machine. . . . We caught 'em young, my dear; for which piece of wisdom credit will somewhere be chalked up!"

The two boys were naturally not so selective as

Father. For them, every day had its comparatively imperishable moment, whether of surprise, pleasure or disappointment. To Tom, more self-concerned because more mature than Jack, the week was a biological specimen which he placed on his own slide and examined through his own lens. Its interest and importance were in proportion only as they measured up to his own plans and desires. Consequently, although the week yielded much, he missed many moments which to Jack, in his greater state of receptivity, were vital.

Jack, for instance, had had a profound shock, a trembling of the pillars of the temple, when with a glow of pride he had introduced Monsieur de Rohan to his father, — Monsieur de Rohan to whom he had boasted of Father's fluency in many tongues. Unlike Monsieur Meuvret, the Abbé de Rohan did not speak a word of English, and Jack, now comparatively bilingual, made the presentation in French.

Then it was that the first seed of doubt was planted in his mind, the first great question mark erected along the way. Father had replied in French, true, but with an accent that to Jack's accustomed ear was little short of horrific! At the moment Jack thought that Father was doing it because perhaps he was shy of Monsieur de Rohan, but, as he listened, mistakes in gender and even grammar came tumbling from Father's lips!

Even under the shock Jack's sense of loyalty came dashing to the rescue. Father was out of practice, he told himself. He had been in Japan so long, and, before that, not in France for ages. But, after all, Father spoke good English. He didn't forget that in

any country. Why, therefore, didn't he speak good French as he was supposed to do? Could it be the same with his Tamil and Malay? Was his Hindustani merely a smattering, almost a fiction? . . . And if his French was like that, what about all the rest? Had he really built a railway in Persia? Was it true that he had put electric lights all over Japan? How frightful! How perfectly awful!

For one intense second Jack regretted that Father had ever come to St. Malo. He would have liked to put the clock back, to wish him in Japan again so that he could have gone on believing in Father's perfection.

The munificence of the Christmas dinner, reinforced by a plum pudding whose size was beyond criticism, which Father had brought with him all the way from England, went far to obliterate that hateful question mark; but its ramifications proved themselves to be still alive when Monsieur de Rohan got up one evening from the harmonium in the billard room and asked Mother if she would not sing now, — he had heard from Jack what a lovely voice she had.

Jack's heart pounded. He clenched his fists hard. It was true that Mother had a lovely voice. She had! She had! . . . Holding his breath, and with his stomach muscles all tight, he almost prayed as she rose and went over to the harmonium stool, fussed for a moment with the stops. Could it possibly be that Mother's singing was like Father's French? And then she began to sing, and as her voice floated into the room, he relaxed in perfect security. Mother's voice *was* beautiful. Of course it was. He had always known it. It didn't need Monsieur de Rohan's enthusiasm to

tell him that. There was no hearsay about it. The knowledge was actual, within himself, therefore unassailable. And Father was really all right too, only, — oh, well, he must never tell Marcel or anybody what a wonderful linguist he was. That wasn't true any more.

Chapter Ten

By the time the howling storms of winter had departed, leaving the raging sea to settle down once more and put on its summer suit of blue, the evolution of the two boys took a pace forward.

For both of them saturation point had been reached, emotionally speaking, in the matter of their environment. French manners, habits and methods of thought, no longer excited either surprise or comparison. They were accepted as such, and, what is more, adopted. Even the fathers of rhetoricians and philosophers in the Division des Grands were unable to pick out the two English boys in the playground, so completely had they absorbed the color of their surroundings.

With minds thus released from the conscious task of assimilation, it was inevitable that they should reach out into other fields.

Always a pace ahead of his brother, and with the Scotch desire to acquire information more deeply engrained in him, Tom came gradually to the realisation that he was confronted by an obstacle in religion. Here was something going on all about him which he couldn't understand. With curiosity centres in full operation he had watched the services in Chapel, Mass, High and Low, and evening Benediction. At first all he got out of it was mildly emotional, a feeling that he must control his muscles out of deference to the

fact that he was "in church", and a sense of pleasant relaxation induced by music, the nice smell of incense and the Christmas-tree effect of candles and flowers.

Intellectually he drew a blank. There was apparently no more rhyme or reason in any of the action that took place on the altar than there was in the wild stamping and howling of witch doctors in Central Africa, descriptions and illustrations of which he had read and seen in the books of Rider Haggard. Mass, for example, was nothing more than old Meuvret, or one of the other priests, all dressed up in vestments, looking solemn instead of jolly, chanting, and a little out of tune at that, in flowery Latin which didn't seem to have any real meaning when translated. The queer thing about it all was that Jean Kerouec and Marcel Bourné sometimes had a far-away look when they had swallowed that piece of white stuff at the altar rail and came marching back to their seats. And then, too, he could have sworn that once or twice he had seen tears in Hippolyte Thibault's eyes as he knelt down after communion. What on earth did it do to them?

The sermons were even more confusing. How possibly could God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost be three different persons and yet one and the same person. That was silly. And if God was supposed to be the father of Jesus Christ, what was this chap Saint Joseph doing in the story? If he was married to the Virgin Mary, it seemed rotten bad luck to have to stand by while she had some one else's child, this Holy Ghost's. There wasn't any sense in all that mix-up. The only fact you could really pin anything on to was that Jesus Christ was terribly brave to go and let himself be crucified, even though

his motive wasn't a bit clear. How could he "save the world" by doing that? Save it from what? How about all those Japs that Father told about, and the people in India who worshipped funny brass Buddhas and Shivas, with sacred cows and things? Had Jesus saved them? Or had he only managed to save all the Catholics? And what about Jack and himself and Father and Mother? Father and Mother never went to church, but if because of that they would have to go to hell for all eternity, why then God was not only a fathead but hateful and wicked!

The picture of Mother being burned for ever and ever made Tom boil with rage, — Mother, who had never done anything wrong in her life! It must be impossible . . . and yet, they said God was all-powerful. Perhaps they really knew, these priests. Perhaps Mother was in danger! . . . A shiver ran through him. His eyes went from the realistic corpse on the cross to the carved cruelties of the fourteen stations that led to the crucifixion. He looked again at the tears streaming down the face of the Virgin Mary. Little by little, horror of it all crept into him.

It was all very well to say you didn't believe it, but these people had the evidence not only in wood, stone and writing, but in the very lives of old Meuvret, who was so perfectly ripping, the Abbé de Rohan, such a decent chap, and the others.

For many days Tom went about with puckered eyebrows, obsessed by apprehension, bogged in doubt, driven by a need to understand thoroughly. Either it was true, in which case something must immediately be done about it, or it was a lie, and then he could chuck it overboard and go on again.

"I won't tell Jack," he said to himself. "It wouldn't be fair. And in any case he doesn't know the answer, so what's the use? I wonder if I could ask old Meuvret? Monsieur de Rohan would laugh at me, but I don't think old Meuvret would. . . . I'll have to ask him. I must ask him!"

Yet even though he felt that the Abbé Meuvret would take him seriously, Tom had at least half a dozen opportunities to talk to him before he found the courage to broach the subject.

Finally one morning he saw him crossing the playground as the class surged out of the door for the mid-morning break. Obeying a sudden impulse, he ran and caught him up. "Are you going to your room, Monsieur?"

"Yes," said the Abbé. "Do you want to come?"

Tom nodded. "There's something very important I want to ask you."

"Very well," said the Abbé. "Give me time to roll a cigarette and we'll tackle it."

They went up the stairs together in silence. In the room the Abbé hung his hat on the nail in the door as usual, sat down at his desk, took tobacco and cigarette paper out of the drawer and then struck a sulphur match. The first two mouthfuls of tobacco smoke went deep into his lungs. Then he crossed one leg over the other and looked across at Tom. "Well?" he said.

Tom had pulled up the chair on the other side of the desk and was opening and shutting the lid of the inkwell. For a moment or two he didn't reply. Then he looked across at the Abbé and blurted out, "When my mother dies, is she going to hell?"

The Abbé's cigarette paused on its way to his lips. He met the boy's eyes steadily. "No," he said. "I certainly don't think so."

"But she isn't a Catholic and she doesn't go to church!"

"I don't think that need count against her," said the Abbé. He allowed himself a tiny smile. "From what I've seen of her, I should say she was absolutely safe!"

Tom was staring across the desk with perplexed eyes.

A great load was lifted from his mind. The sword of Damocles no longer dangled by a thread above his mother's head. Old Meuvret never lied, and he was a priest, and therefore if he said Mother was safe, she was. It was settled. So he dismissed that part of it from his mind. But the problem itself had become even more difficult, since here was an added illogicality to wrestle with. And now that the personal element was out of it, it seemed harder than ever to ask the priest to explain. It was rather like going into a place where there was a "No Trespassing" board stuck up.

"Then that's all right," he said. "But all the same I don't understand."

"Lots of people don't," said the Abbé. "Philosophers and scientists have been cracking their heads over it for a thousand years or more, and here you come at sixteen and expect me to explain it all to you in five minutes! My dear Tom, suppose you had never heard of Euclid and walked into a classroom and saw me working out a problem on the blackboard. Do you think you'd be able to make head or tail of it?"

"No," said Tom. "I shouldn't know the definitions, for one thing."

The Abbé nodded approvingly. "Exactly!" he said. "And so, having listened to a lot of sermons in chapel, you've been trying to add what looks like two and two, and the answer won't come out four. Isn't that it?"

"Yes," said Tom eagerly. "That's just it!"

The Abbé smiled whimsically through the curling cigarette smoke.

"If I were thirty years younger, I should probably leap at this opportunity and try to make a good Catholic out of you! But I'm too old, and I've done too much thinking. To me religion has got nothing to do with going to church. It's an individual problem, something that every man has to work out for himself and not accept blindly like a pack of sheep obeying the bark of the sheep dog. Metaphorically speaking, I've been a sheep dog for forty years and the percentage of those who have reasoned out my barkings and gone on obeying is discouragingly low. I've come to the conclusion that there is more good in an honest man who is not a Catholic than in a dishonest Catholic, one who pays mere lip service, as the average man might pay a yearly premium on a fire insurance policy, just in case of accidents! Do you see what I mean? It has got to be all or nothing, not a slipshod acceptance. And so it has become my belief, a slow and painful one, that there may be more and better Catholics out of the church than in it. Perhaps that is why I go on barking, although very gently now, without many teeth to back it up! Who knows? At least it is a part of the human desire to enforce one's

own ego, convictions — call it what you like — upon one's neighbor."

The Abbé broke off, gave an odd laugh, blinked a couple of times at Tom through his glasses. It was more as though he had been speaking to himself than to the boy. He dabbed his cigarette out in the ash tray and brushed one hand against the other. Then he laughed again, quite differently. "You seem to have the knack of starting me rambling! It's because you're that rare being, an intelligent and sympathetic listener! However, I didn't end up so very far from where we began, did I?"

Tom shook his head. "What you said was frightfully interesting! I'm glad I came and asked you. All the same, there are heaps of other things I want to know, if only you'd explain them to me."

"There are, eh?" Monsieur Meuvret studied the boy for a moment. Then he gave a sort of grunt, switched his chair round and selected a book from the shelf on the wall beside him. "If I know anything at all about you, young man, you won't be satisfied until you've got the whole story! Isn't that about the size of it?"

Tom laughed. "I really would like to try and understand it."

"Well," said the Abbé, "here's a book that I don't give to everybody. It's an analysis of many different religions. There are a great number of things that you won't understand, but I'll give you the book to study on condition that you come and ask me whenever you're stumped. Is it a bargain?"

"Rather!" said Tom.

"All right," said the Abbé. "And you understand,

of course, that you mustn't lend it to anybody in study, not even Jack. I don't think he's old enough yet." He passed the book over.

With a thrill of pride Tom took it. In an odd, indefinable way he felt that his relationship with Monsieur Meuvret had changed, that from now on he was admitted to be a grown-up. Hadn't the priest opened a door for a moment and let him see through? And hadn't he entrusted him with another kind of pass-key, a key that would unlock the riddle of the universe? . . . And then, too, Monsieur Meuvret had completely taken away that dreadful feeling of apprehension. The flames of hell no longer awaited him. They had become a subject to study, to discuss, a purely academic question involving a series of definitions and hypotheses.

In Tom's imagination the crucifix ceased to occupy the foreground, became an inanimate object once more. The seven devils of religious dread had been exorcised: and while mentally he was greatly stimulated, emotionally he was at peace.

Chapter Eleven

JACK might have been too young to have his imagination stirred by the niceties of comparative religions, but he had long since reached the age when the naïve, almost crude beauty of the chivalric ballads, as read to him by Father, touched a responsive chord.

At first Mother had stood for the personification of Guinevere and all the other simple-minded women for whom the Knights of the Round Table waded through pools of blood. But with the unfolding days, it didn't seem quite reasonable that King Arthur and Lancelot and Galahad should concern themselves with Mother. After all, she already had Father and Tom and himself, and somehow he couldn't quite see her letting down her hair from castle windows or galloping wildly on anybody's saddlebow, especially as she was a little afraid of horses. By the time Father read him "Aucassin and Nicolette" — and he cried himself to sleep that night because of their desperate unhappiness — he knew that he was wrong about Mother. She couldn't possibly be Nicolette too, because Nicolette was French. And so in his dreams he began to see dimly the forms of women who were not Mother.

At this period there had been several small girls in the neighborhood who had been brought around to tea parties, and he and Tom had been told to play with them. But they were nasty little creatures who cried for the least thing and were frightened the

minute they were out of sight of the house. They weren't a bit like the ones you read about. Their hair got in the way, and they couldn't climb trees or do anything worth while because of their silly skirts. There wasn't any fun in playing with them, unless you deliberately set out to see how soon you could make them cry, so that they would run back to their mothers, and then you didn't have to bother with them any more. The fact that they were potential Guineveres never entered his head. Once he had been told to kiss one because it was her birthday and he was at her party. But he hadn't wanted to be at her old party anyhow, and the idea seemed so repulsive that he had jammed his hands in his pockets and refused to budge. Whereupon she had come and kissed him — just like a girl who couldn't see anything! — and he scowled and wiped it hurriedly off with his hand. Now, however, while Tom was worrying about something or other and swotting over an old book that Monsieur Meuvret had given him, and which Tom wouldn't even show him, Jack made his first personal discovery of the opposite sex. He found Nicolette. She had blue eyes and golden hair, and she must have been at least thirteen, and she was so lovely that . . . that . . . gosh! If only he could rush in and rescue her from some frightful accident! Hang it all, the days of accidents were past, and there was nothing but school every day and not a chance to show what he could do!

They had come back, Monsieur Meuvret, Tom and himself, from the town of St. Etienne on the other side of the port where Monsieur Meuvret had been to see some man or other. The name of the town set Jack singing under his breath:

"Good king Wenceslas looked out
On the feast of Stephen
And the snow lay round about,
Deep and crisp and even."

It was a feast day, too, but not that of Stephen. Instead of snow lying round about, the white roads were baked. Their shoes and ankles were grey with powder, and every inch of Jack's shirt was sticking to his body.

"Couldn't we have a swim before going back to *déjeuner?*" he asked.

Monsieur Meuvret shook his head. He was striding along so that Jack had to run a few paces every little while in order to keep up with him. "This afternoon," said the Abbé. "We shall only just get back in time, as it is."

Jack turned to his brother. "Have you got any money for fly-biscuits, Tom?"

"I lent you fifty centimes last Thursday," said Tom. "What did you do with that?"

"I owed it to Marcel," said Jack.

"Well, I've only got thirty centimes left," said Tom, "and I've promised that to Thibault for his old compass."

Jack made another run and looked up at Monsieur Meuvret. "Could you possibly lend me another franc this afternoon? I owe you four now and that would make a nice even total; and then on Monday when we get our pocket money, I'll pay you two francs and a half, which will leave me the other two and a half to last me through the week. Do you see?"

Monsieur Meuvret saw. "I'll tell you what I suggest," he said. "Instead of lending you another franc,

which will land you more deeply in debt than ever, why don't I buy the biscuits to-day? I've eaten lots of yours since you introduced me to them."

"Will you really?" said Jack. "Why, that would be awfully nice. And you needn't bother to carry them. I'll do that for you!"

And so, with thoughts that were aimed no higher than the stomach, Jack trekked under the Grande Porte with the others, all unaware of the revelation that lay just ahead of him.

They found the street strewn with flowers and lined with people who knelt or stood, bareheaded, their faces turned in the direction of an approaching procession, led by little boys in purple cassocks and white surplices that almost reached their ankles. Some of them swung silver vessels by long chains, from which curled clouds of fragrant incense. The rest were dwarfed by the huge candles that weighed them down, their lighted wicks giving off small tongues of yellow flame that flattened out behind as they walked, like tiny pennons on white lances. They were followed by a choir of priests, round-mouthed, singing as they walked, perspiring freely under the burden of gold and silver embroidered vestments. Behind them bobbed and swayed a scarlet canopy, carried by four bearded acolytes. It served less as protection than as a focus point, or stage setting, for the almost decrepit Monseigneur, who tottered bravely along beneath it, bearing aloft the Host in a receptacle made of gold and flashing with gems.

Monsieur Meuvret glanced at his watch, raised his eyebrows, removed his shovel hat and stood patiently to await the passing of the procession. To him, per-

haps, there was nothing more striking in it than the watching of a parade of one regiment by a soldier of another, long familiar with the order of march.

To the two boys it was a pageant, a piece of folklore, not as exciting, perhaps, as a cavalcade of knights in armour but compensated by the added element of bowed heads and deep, silent reverence of the assembled citizenry. With their *casquettes* in their hands, they squeezed through like eels, negotiating a position for themselves in the second rank just as the head of the procession drew level.

The harmonised chanting in sonorous Latin, unaccompanied except by the measured shuffle of many feet, sent a shivery tingle down Jack's spine. He stood rooted, hands dangling, unconsciously allowing an indelible memory of sound and feeling to be etched upon his mind.

And then Nicolette happened!

He suddenly felt a tiny hand come creeping into his, warm and snuggly, soft as down. And presently, like a bird shifting its position in the nest, it stirred and the fingers interlocked with his own.

A wave of pure emotion surged over the small boy, — an infinite tenderness, a consciousness of something very beautiful and very sacred; as though the inmost part of him, the Jack that he himself did not know and only dimly suspected, had suddenly been found by a companion.

Scarcely breathing and absolutely motionless lest the hand should be frightened away, which would have been a tragedy, he gave the faintest pressure in sign of welcome. At once he was rewarded. Her fingers — he knew it was Her fingers — tightened and

he could feel the pulse in the palm of her hand beating against his. . . .

It seemed to Jack then that the entire procession had suddenly been put into an express train. The incense swingers and candle bearers flashed by at a pace that almost made him giddy, the chanting of the choir sank to a mere far-away hum, and the aged Monseigneur dwindled to the proportions of a rag doll.

It was over . . . all over . . . and he had got to go away from here! He drew a deep breath, almost of pain, as her hand squeezed his in farewell and then let go.

"Come on!" said Tom.

Jack didn't even hear his brother. He turned quickly, to come face to face with — Nicolette. It couldn't possibly be any one else. She was standing close behind him, blue eyes and golden hair under a curly straw hat with a blue ribbon. He knew that he could survive terrible things for her, even death itself. Their eyes met. She did not smile. Neither of them said anything. They looked at each other in perfect understanding.

Then a grown-up voice said, *"Viens, chérie!"*

Jack never knew to whom it belonged. He was looking into those blue eyes, clinging to them with a sudden desperate desire that she should not go; but, as though in a dream, he was rooted, bound hand and foot, incapable of action.

Her body turned first; then her head began to move, and at last, lingeringly, she turned away her eyes.

With a sense of unlocated agony, Jack saw that she

was walking away. It didn't enter his head to follow her. How could one follow a note of music, or the splash of opal left by the sun?

"What the deuce is the matter with you?" growled Tom. "Old Meuvret's waving from the other side of the street. Are you going to hang about here all day?"

Then at last she turned and looked back. If she hadn't, Jack felt he would have died; and, as he stumbled after Tom, his eyes in a dream, he put his hand to his mouth, secretly — the hand that was still warm with the touch of hers — and kissed it.

Chapter Twelve

THAT afternoon the purchase of "fly-biscuits" by Monsieur Meuvret, the fact that they went out to Paramé by steam tram instead of walking, the added, and ordinarily disappointing, fact that there would be no tea afterwards at the house of the English people, passed completely over Jack's head.

He didn't hear a word that Tom and Monsieur Meuvret said. Remarks addressed to himself had to be repeated, and then he only nodded or shook his head. When they undressed he lay for a while in the hot sand, dreamily watching it sift through his fingers, and seeing, not the sand at all, but the face of Nicolette. He was a knight now, and everything he did must be for the glory of his lady.

After a time he got up and followed the others into the sea, but, instead of joining them, he swam off to a group of rocks where there was a flat place in the sun to lie on and bask. He wanted to be alone. Having arrived there, he pulled himself out of the water and sat with his feet dangling into a deep pool, feeling with his toes at the various clumps of sea ferns that were so beautiful and odd-shaped shellfish that couldn't possibly be pried loose, not even if you used your heel instead of your toe. . . . How wonderful it was to have found her, and how frightfully responsible! . . . He looked up as he heard a splashing and blowing coming near. Oh, hang! Why

didn't Tom stay with old Meuvret this afternoon when he wanted to go on thinking?

Tom heaved himself glowing on to the rock. "Isn't this grand?" he said. "Just look at it!" His eyes led Jack's across the brown jagged rocks and golden sand to the sweeping bay whose blue was exactly the same color as old Meuvret's illuminated missal. Here and there a sail gleamed white, like the wing of a dropping gull, and away off, behind it all, cut out against the sky like a cardboard city, was the spire-crowned clump of dark buildings that was the town of St. Malo.

"Old Meuvret's a bit behind with his breviary," said Tom, "so he's gone off to catch up. There he is, look, behind that rock! You can just see his big toe sticking out!" He laughed.

"It is a big toe too! He has the most enormous feet," said Jack.

Tom nodded. He had a strip of seaweed in his hand and was popping the small bladders in it. "Do you remember how the kids at school at home used to brag about an Englishman's being able to knock out two Froggies with one hand tied behind his back? I'd like to see anybody try it on with old Meuvret! By golly, he'd give 'em what for! I'd like to have arms and legs like his, wouldn't you?"

"Rather!" said Jack. "He's splendid! And so's Monsieur de Rohan. We had a wrestling match one day up in the billiard room and he's as hard as a brick. He told me afterwards that before he became a priest he used to be a champion fencer. Did you know that?"

Tom whistled. "No, but that explains something I saw him do the other day. Boutet and Vernier were

scrapping in the corridor and Monsieur de Rohan came along. He watched them for a while, and then told them to chuck it. When they wouldn't, he took one in each hand and gave a heave and they simply flattened out against opposite walls!"

"Know what I think?" said Jack. "I think he ought to have been a troubadour instead of a priest. He's so jolly, and with that voice . . ."

"Hullo!" said Tom. "What's that thing out there? Don't believe I noticed it before."

"What thing?"

Tom pointed. "That black thing. See it?"

Jack got up. In a moment his eyes picked up an object that bobbed up and down in the water a long way out. "What do you suppose it is? . . . It might be a treasure chest!"

"By Jove!" said Tom. "Let's swim out and get it!"

Jack took another look. "It's an awful long way!" he said doubtfully.

"Oh, rot!" said Tom. "We've swum as far as that hundreds of times."

Jack shook his head. "No. I don't think we'd better. Old Meuvret wouldn't like it."

Tom glanced at his brother and laughed shortly. "I think you're afraid!" he said. "I dare you!"

Jack could feel the blood creeping up the back of his neck. He was afraid. That black thing out there looked miles away. As usual, Tom had put his finger right on the spot! But he was much more afraid to admit that he was afraid. You couldn't possibly do that, not for anything in the world! How could you go about being a coward for the rest of your life? And besides . . . Nicolette would never look at him

again. Nicolette! Why, of course! Here was the opportunity to go through something for her! It was a challenge, a gage flung down! . . . He glanced out to sea again. It was dreadfully far! Would she really want him to risk that? He could feel his heart pounding against his ribs, just as if he had run a race.

Tight-lipped, he turned to his brother. "I'll beat you there!" he said, and flung himself into the sea.

"Good for you!" cried Tom and dived after him.

Monsieur Meuvret's toe didn't move. He was deep in his breviary.

In the first rush Tom caught up with his brother. He turned his head and spluttered, "Don't let's race! We won't have any wind left when we get there."

Jack made no answer. He needed all the breath he had. His face low in the water, he changed from side stroke to breast stroke and went on doggedly plugging along. The sea was like a quietly lifting sheet of glass. After the first two minutes Jack forgot that their goal was a longer distance than they had ever been. He settled down to the job of swimming, almost exultantly, his sense of fear entirely gone, driven out by sheer pressure of physical exertion.

Gradually, however, the pace became slower and slower. He could feel his breath coming short, and his arms and legs began to seem like leaden weights. Desperately he stretched his neck, raising himself in the water. Golly, they weren't halfway yet! Could he possibly do it? Or ought they to turn back now, before they were absolutely exhausted? It would be so lovely on the hot sand! If only Tom would turn round! But he couldn't possibly suggest it. Tom would

jeer and boo! He glanced across. Tom was swimming along apparently as fresh as when he started. Jack bit his lip and a wave of angry resentment flooded over him. Confound Tom! Why had he dared him to do this? Tom hadn't any right to know that he was afraid! And, hang it, he wasn't afraid! He would get there or die in the attempt, and if he did die, Tom would have to be sorry all the rest of his life!

He turned on his back and paddled quietly for a time, resting. Then, with set teeth, he rolled over and started off again with a long, slow side stroke. "Aucassin never gave up!" he muttered and repeated it to himself inside, making it the rhythm for every kick he took.

After what seemed an age of that steady repetition, a shout from Tom broke in. "Here we are! It's not a treasure chest at all! It's nothing but an old fishing float!"

Jack laughed and lay on his back, panting. What did he care what it was? They were there! They had done it! He hadn't given up!

"See?" said Tom. "It's a huge piece of cork and there's a rope dangling down from it. Probably it goes right down to the bottom, where there's a net. Suppose there are a lot of fish in it? What fun if we could only pull it up and catch some!" He took the cork float in his hands. It was not quite big enough to support him, and when he pulled on the rope he promptly went under. He came up spluttering and laughing. "Can't budge it!" he said. "It's too heavy."

"Fathead!" said Jack. "Of course you can't. The rope alone probably weighs a ton, to say nothing of the net!"

Tom went on holding the cork, his legs all mixed up in the rope.

"Come on!" said Jack. "Let's go back now. It's a dickens of a long way, and we sha'n't have any time to eat our fly-biscuits. It's no fun trying to eat them with old Meuvret walking along at sixty miles an hour."

"Ow!" cried Tom. "I've got cramp!"

Jack laughed. "Rats!" he said. "Don't play the fool! Come on!"

"I'm not playing the fool!" said Tom. "It's all down my left leg. Gosh, it feels as if it were all tied into knots! Ow!"

Jack's face went white. He took a couple of quick strokes nearer to his brother. A moment ago he had the unuttered question at the back of his mind, "Can I swim all that way back?" And now he was responsible for Tom! "Hang on to the cork with one hand and rub your leg with the other!" He snapped it out as if it were an order.

Tom obeyed. After a moment he said, "It's no good. It hurts like the very deuce."

"Can't you possibly swim with it?"

"I could try swimming with my arms and one leg, but I don't think I'd get very far. Perhaps if we both yell together, we can catch old Meuvret's attention and I can hang on to the cork till he comes."

"Waste of breath!" said Jack. "Turn over on your back and let go the cork. I'll tow you in."

"You can't tow me all that way!"

"Can't I? Shut up and turn over!"

Once more, to Jack's surprise, Tom obeyed. Jack paddled up to him and, supporting his brother's head

with one hand, began slowly and laboriously to make for the shore.

They did not speak any more. Tom was biting his lip to keep himself from yelling at the excruciating pain in his leg. From time to time he gasped, "Are you all right, Jack? Don't you want to float for a minute and have a rest?"

And underneath him, so tired that he couldn't think clearly, but kicking out steadily as though his body were obeying a now purely subconscious dictation, Jack was unable to answer. All he knew was that he mustn't stop. If he stopped, they would sink. His mind became a separate thing, floating loose, gibbering at him like somebody else's ghost. "Mother would be so dreadfully sorry. . . . *Ave Maria gratia plena domine non sum dignus*. . . . You're miles away yet, but you've got to get him in. . . . *Non, Monsieur, je vous assure que ce n'était pas moi!* . . . It was Father who said *le* instead of *la*. . . . A franc and a half to Marcel, and Hippolyte owes me fifty centimes. . . . It was just inside the Grande Porte and her eyes were as deep as the sea. No, I hate the sea. It wants to hurt you. . . ."

The sea didn't feel like warm milk any more. It had changed its texture to that of ice-cold treacle, so thick that his legs could only just go through it . . . only just . . . only just . . .

Monsieur Meuvret closed his breviary with a snap. *"Au nom du Père et du Fils et du saint Esprit!"* he muttered, and put the book down inside his upturned shovel hat. Then he stretched luxuriously till all his joints went off like little firecrackers. The untouched bag of "fly-biscuits" caught his eye. *"Tiens!"* he mut-

tered, and then called, "Time to go, boys!" He got up and walked out from behind the rock. "Hullo there, Tom! Come along, Jack!" There was no answer. He looked around in the direction of the pools where they were generally to be seen prowling. There was no sign of them. He called again. There was not even an echo. There were only two piles of their clothes, lying mutely on the sand. *"Mais, mon Dieu!"* said the Abbé. Alarm was telegraphed to the extremities of his being. He clamped his glasses more firmly on and stared out to sea. Nothing interrupted the smoothness of that sheet of glass. Alarm became panic. With a hard, bitter taste in his mouth that was difficult to swallow, he took a pace or two down the beach, paused, stared, and then began to run. Could those two small brownish dots out there. . . . They were only just moving! As he waded in, the water foamed and curled about his legs. Then he threw himself flat and began to swim, praying that his glasses wouldn't come off.

It was Tom who heard the oncoming shout. With one leg curled up and the other trailing because he was afraid of kicking Jack, he was doing his best to help by using his arms in time with Jack's barely moving legs. At the sound of Monsieur Meuvret's voice he called out, in an agony of relief. "Here's Monsieur Meuvret, Jack! We're all right now! Just a few strokes more!"

In comparison with their infinitely slow progress, the Abbé came crashing up like a liner. He put one huge hand under Jack and said to Tom, "Hold on to my shoulder! . . . Wake up there, Jack! We're not quite on shore yet!"

Jack's half-closed eyes came open. He smiled and in a half-dazed murmur said, "Have you got Tom? Golly. . . ." His voice gave out.

The Abbé turned round, and, with a boy hanging on to each shoulder struck out for the shore.

By the time they reached shallow water Tom let go and hopped and floundered till he reached the beach, where he began to rub his leg and work it up and down. Monsieur Meuvret picked Jack up in his arms and waded ashore with him. "There!" he said, and put him down.

Jack's legs promptly gave way under him. He sat down with a little laugh, rolled over and lay flat on his back. At the contact of the warm sand his eyes closed. He snuggled down into it, caught hold of it with his hands, loved it with every inch of skin that responded to the splendid solidity of it. He couldn't sink now, and Tom's cramp didn't matter here, and all he had to do was to lie still with the heavenly assurance that everything was all right. . . . Gosh, how strong old Meuvret was! . . . But, by golly, if that was the sort of thing you had to do to win your spurs, how frightfully hard it would be later on, when the real things happened!

Tom came limping up. "You all right, Jack?" He peered anxiously into his brother's face.

"He will be soon," said the Abbé, "but I should call that a pretty close shave. Perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me what happened?"

Tom swung round and faced the Abbé. "It's nothing to do with Jack!" he said. "It's all my fault. I dared him to swim out to that float and it was really

too far and I knew it. But Jack said it was too far and so of course I knew we had to swim out there to prove that we could do it. And then, when we were there, I got cramp like an idiot and Jack had to tow me all the way back. . . . Are you sure you're all right, Jack?"

Jack stirred. It felt as if all the ache was beginning to run down his body and ooze out of his toes into the sand. "Yes, of course!" he murmured. "I just want to lie here for a little while, that's all. . . . Bring the fly-biscuits over!"

As Tom hurried away to the rock, the Abbé looked from one to the other, almost speechless with amazement, horror and affection. These two were after his own heart. Their loyalty to each other was beyond their understanding; they didn't know what it was to lie; and here one of them had calmly saved the other's life with nothing more than a laugh! What great things might be in store for them one day! What building on such a foundation! . . . *"C'est magnifique!"* he muttered, *"Mais . . . ce n'est pas la guerre!"* He waited until Tom came back with the bag and placed a biscuit in Jack's hand, watching to see if he could manage to eat it.

Then Monsieur Meuvret spoke. "Now, listen to me, you boys! This is the last time I'll ever bring you swimming if you're going to behave like imbeciles the moment my back is turned! . . . Tom, if I ever hear of your 'daring' Jack to do anything again, I'll put you on the next boat for Southampton! And, Jack, if you accept his 'dare,' you'll go with him! Do you hear me? I refuse to be responsible for two idiots!"

With which, he marched away to roll himself a much-needed cigarette.

Perhaps there was a leak somewhere, a quality of determination lacking in the Abbé's voice; for Jack's eyes came open, met Tom's and he winked solemnly.

Chapter Thirteen

THE letter lay open on Monsieur Meuvret's desk.

The Abbé himself was striding up and down the room, clasping and unclasping his hands behind his back. *"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Quelle tragédie! Les pauvres enfants! . . . Mon Dieu, qu'est-ce que je vais faire?"*

He went to the desk, picked up the letter and read it again, his eyes narrow with pain. He looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was eleven. Classes were in full swing. Would it be better to wait, or ought they to know at once? . . . Wait for what? If only they could wait for years to know this thing!

The Abbé folded the letter, thought for a moment and then put it in the desk drawer, out of sight. He cleared his throat with unusual vehemence, took off his glasses, wiped them, adjusted them carefully on his nose again, and went, tight-lipped, to the door.

The wind blowing up the stone stairway had a touch of cold in it.

Through the classroom window, Jack caught sight of the Abbé as he crossed the playground. "If only he'd come and lug us out of here!" he thought, and his regretful eyes went back once more to the history book in which the exploits of Charlemagne were so dully narrated that they were without appeal to the youthful imagination.

Two minutes afterwards the sound of the class-

room door being opened and shut made every eye look up.

Monsieur Meuvret walked between the rows of desks straight up to the *"pion's"* rostrum. The *"pion"* leaned down, a question mark in each raised eyebrow. Monsieur Meuvret whispered, and as he did so the eyes of the *"pion"* left him and travelled from Tom to Jack.

The boy next to Jack put his hand to his mouth and whispered, *"Sacré veinard!* Grandmother Meuvret's come to fetch her little chicks!"

"Ta gueule, espèce de chameau!" snapped Jack in quick defense of the Abbé, his heart giving a leap of hope. It was like the answer to prayer! But in the middle of class . . . what on earth? Before he had time to question Tom, Monsieur Meuvret said aloud, "Thomas! . . . Jacques!" and made a beckoning sign with his head. Then he stalked down the room, waiting at the door till the two boys joined him there. He shut the door on a buzz of excited whispering which, a moment later, drew the flat hand of the *"pion"* down with a bang on the lid of his rostrum. *"Eh bien! Assez de conversation! Au travail, s'il vous plait!"*

Meanwhile, as they went down the stairs, Monsieur Meuvret said, "We're going up to my room. I have something to tell you."

There was a strained formality in his voice that made Tom and Jack look at one another silently.

The wind was blowing up whirls of dust as they crossed the playground. "It'll be cold soon," thought Tom. "Not many more swims now!" Then they went through the other doorway and their boots began to

make the hollow sound which they always did on that stone staircase.

Inside his room, the Abbé closed the door carefully. He did not go as usual to the chair at his desk and sit down. Instead, he took up a position at the mantelpiece. His fingers reached instinctively for the cigarette papers. Then, as though remembering something, he put them down on the mantelpiece and pushed them away from him.

Jack noticed the little manoeuvre. "Oh, please do smoke!" he said. "It's ever so much nicer when you do. And may I sit on the bed?"

The Abbé swung round. "Of course!" he said. "Sit anywhere you like. You . . . I . . . My dear boys, I don't know how to begin!" He reached under his soutane for the large red bandanna that he always carried in his trousers pocket, and began to mop his forehead.

Tom's face tightened.

"That means it's something bad," he said. "Won't you please tell us quickly?"

Jack was on the point of jumping up on to the high bed. He paused, looked back at Tom, and then stood very still.

The Abbé put a hand on Tom's shoulder. "I've had a letter from your mother . . ."

"Then she's all right," said Tom, "otherwise she couldn't have written. It must be about Father!"

Monsieur Meuvret looked down into the boy's frightened but steady eyes. "There has been a dreadful accident in Japan," he said, and it seemed to him that he felt the boy shrivel under his hand.

"And Father was in it! Then he . . . he's . . ."

Tom turned a little, slipped from under the Abbé's hand and went and stared out of the window.

"He's what?" demanded Jack. "Why don't you speak up?"

Tom didn't move from the window. He merely said in a flat, dull voice, "Father's dead."

The Abbé blew his nose loudly.

It reminded Jack of an elephant trumpeting, with its ears all spread out. It was so silly to be reminded of an elephant when Father was dead. The silliness made him give a ridiculous giggle. Father wouldn't see any more elephants now. And what did it matter if his French had been bad. . . . How beastly to think of that! He mustn't think of it ever. In fact, he must forget it, try to, anyway, because Father was . . . Father was *dead*. . . .

Rather in the manner of a delay-action shell which bursts only after it lands, the word "dead" which Tom had fired at him and which he had repeated almost meaninglessly, suddenly exploded in Jack's mind. It was Father who was dead! Father! . . . His face crumpled, his breath came in choking gulps. How could death possibly get in like that and carry off Father without any warning? He flung himself on the Abbé's bed and buried his head in the pillow.

At the sound of his choking, Tom wheeled from the window. His face was hard, white, strained, almost fierce, as though he would have liked nothing better than to grapple Fate and tear its throat out. The illogic of Father being killed in somebody else's accident, of Mother having her heart broken, and for absolutely no reason, no good. . . . It was all wrong. The scheme was rotten, and all those comparative

religions couldn't explain it away. They were nothing but gropings, meek surrenders. . . . He reached over and caught Jack by the elbow. "It's all right, Jack!" he said. "It's all right! It's no good howling! . . . It isn't fair! Oh, damn, it isn't fair! . . . Come on! We can't stay here any more. Let's go and pack. We've got to go home."

The idea of going home was so radical that it penetrated Jack's sobs, checked them. He lifted a blurred face from the pillow, — and was almost startled by the change in Tom: he looked so hard. He seemed to have become a lot older. Did death do that? Was he himself older too? No, it was probably only Tom. He was always so quick.

Jack got up. "All right," he said. "I'm ready."

The Abbé could hardly speak. "My dear boys!" he stammered. "My dear boys!" and included them both in a wide gesture that was intended to convey his companionship in their misery. Then he added, "You need not pack yet. Your mother says she is coming over. She will be here to-morrow. We will go down and meet her at the boat."

Tom nodded. "Yes, I think we'd better," he said. "Where's her letter? I'd like to see it. I think we ought to see it."

The Abbé went over it quickly in his mind and came to the conclusion that there was nothing in it that they might not see, now that the first shock was over. He went to the drawer and took it out. "I'll let you read it by yourselves," he said. "And remember, if you don't feel like going down to the refectory when the bell rings, you may stay here and I will take you down afterwards."

"Thanks awfully," said Tom. "We'd like to do that."

The Abbé gave him the letter, clasped him by the shoulder for a brief second and walked out of the room.

Tom looked at the letter. How extraordinary that Mother's writing should look just the same. It ought to be different, somehow. He turned to his brother. "Better let me read it over first, Jack!"

"No!" said Jack. "I'd much rather read it with you!"

"All right," said Tom. "Let's go over to the desk."

They sat down together on the Abbé's big chair, — two young colts between iron knees, wide-eyed at their first stone wall.

PART TWO

Chapter One

THE rumble of London shook the windows like the bourdon of a distant organ.

The main light in the large old-fashioned green-panelled room suspended from the centre of the ceiling. The original hideous mid-Victorian glass contraption had been replaced, however, by a parchment shade, orange in color and decorated with purplish bunches of grapes. Two other shades of the same design enlivened the electric candle brackets on either side of the fireplace.

The table was under the centre light and the whole of it was an orderly litter of books and papers arranged in a semicircle around the sheet on which Tom was writing. On a chair beside him were a pound tin of tobacco, matches, two pipes, and a brass ash container, solid enough to knock out a pipe on and deep enough tc hold the ashes of a week.

His hair was all rumpled, and the frown that had characterized his boyish moments of concentration was now more deeply in evidence. A clock on the mantelpiece chimed the three quarters. As if at a prearranged signal, Tom laid down his pen. "That's all I'm going to do to-night," he said.

The structure of the armchair by the fire groaned as Jack gave a prodigious stretch. "Me too!" The words came thickly through a yawn. "How d' you come along?"

"Think I can finish it in an hour at the office," said

Tom. He rose and began to fold away the various piles of documents into a brief case.

"Great stuff!" said Jack. "I've done a fairly decent job to-night, myself. Seems to me we've earned a beer. Let's stroll around to Gambrinus."

Tom's eyebrows went up. "Think so?" he queried. "Listen to it outside."

Jack didn't have to. All the evening the steady patter of rain had beaten an accompaniment to the gassy fizzling of the coal fire. "If one had to wait for this hellish weather to change," he said, "one would never go outside the house. Come on. Get your mac. Beer is indicated. . . . Gosh, I hope I can persuade the firm to give me that China job! Be able to see a little sun again then."

The China job again! Tom frowned. It was like the recurring note of an alarm bell. If only he could do something about it, put a crimp in it! "Weather or no weather," he said quickly, "this is the greatest city in the world. There's more success to be made here than anywhere else on earth."

Jack made a face. "That's the psychology of a cow in a barn," he said. "Barring France and Germany, you've never been outside, so you don't know."

Tom looked at his brother as he finished buckling the straps of the brief case. "You've never been outside either," he said, "and yet I really believe you do know. Queer! You're a standing argument for heredity. Incidentally, have you ever realised that you've grown to look exactly like Father, that you smoke a pipe the way he used to, and have the same trick of shoving your hands behind your back at odd moments?"

"Really?" said Jack. "No, I hadn't any idea of it."

"There are times when it's uncanny," said Tom. He gave a laugh. "If we ever become fond parents, there's no question as to which of our progeny will take after its grandfather!"

Jack laughed too. "Well, there's one thing about you, — you can certainly leap ahead still! You make Mother a grandmother before we've even got our jobs sufficiently under way to justify our casting an amorous eye upon the two potential damsels! Our motto has got to be 'eyes in the boat' for years yet." He dived into the clothes closet and tossed a Burberry out for his brother and climbed into one himself. "Got pipe and baccy?"

Tom gave a verifying tap to his pocket and nodded.

On the way down the three flights of stairs Tom opened the conversation again with a great air of casualness. "By the way, while we're on the subject of damsels, where does Miss Clifford come in? Is she potential or not? I thought, when you introduced me to her at your office the other day, that you and she were . . . what shall I say . . . extremely sympathetic."

Jack smiled. "We are! I like Marjorie a whole lot. She's the only one there who doesn't think she's a duchess. But don't worry about her. She's got a 'young man,' and what's more, I've met him. He's assistant floorwalker in a big collar shop in the Strand, and he works like a dog every evening at the Polytechnic so that one day he may blossom out into a second Selfridge."

Tom grunted. "That's all right, so long as she

doesn't chuck him before he begins to blossom, and concentrate on you!"

Jack laughed. "You're barking up the wrong tree! She's not that sort. And besides, she's really in love with her Selfridge. Incidentally, if you were half as observant as a budding barrister ought to be, you might have remarked that it is not my habit to contribute to the sex education of the female species!"

"Fathead! You know perfectly well I didn't mean that!" said Tom. "I merely wanted to know that your armour plating was still intact."

"My dear good ass," said Jack, "would you be crass enough to put a ball and chain around your ankle in the form of a wife and a lot of children at the precise moment of getting your first brief? You might at least pay me the compliment of an almost equal intelligence!"

"Je t'en prie!" said Tom. "Don't rub it in! I apologise! I crawl! I am abject! Let us thank whatever gods there be that neither of us is as yet subjugated by the little blighter with the bow and arrow! Heavens, when I think of all the work there is to do, and how many men there are ahead of me, it'll be a pretty stout Venus who can claw her way through!"

Jack opened the street door with a laugh and followed Tom down the steps into Little James Street.

In the murky light of lamps struggling through the opaque agglomeration of rain and floating fog, the two brothers strode along a dirty pavement fringed with overflowing garbage cans, each one of which had its own aura of rancid smell. By morning the whole offence would have disappeared. Certain lesser beings, toiling while their betters slept, would

have removed the garbage, and others, only slightly higher in the scale of social values, would have replaced the infected cans in those dark and subterranean areas whence underbred and ragged children would later swarm on their way to receive such education as a wise government deemed fitting.

Jack breathed tobacco down his nose. "The greatest city in the world!" he remarked drily. "It's only the climate and its effect on the temperament of the race which prevent our having a juicy little French Revolution of our own!"

Tom glanced quickly at his brother. Was that the alarm bell again? Fundamentally there wasn't anything to be done about it. Either you felt it or you didn't, — the almost mesmeric exhilaration of millions of people, ugly, beautiful, male, female, striving, slacking, loving, dying, but always alluring; the feeling that every single one of them could make anything he liked of the span of life that was in his keeping, according to the measure of his brain; the potential adventure that lay behind every face you met, even in such a slum as Little James Street; the odd conviction that you were always within an ace of putting your hand on the answer to the whole meaning of it all: and then the color of it, — even now the fantastic purple glow above the rain and the millions of golden splashes were flung back to the street lamps by the wet pavements. It was a hub, one of the great capitals, the ultimate expression of a civilisation, and therefore — to him anyhow — the apotheosis of romance.

"As ever," he said, "you exaggerate! Is there any

city of any size which doesn't have this sort of condition to compete with?"

"Perhaps not," said Jack, "but it's nothing to brag about. Give me a blade of grass and a couple of birds singing and a job of work, that's all!"

Tom said nothing. Ever since they had come down from Oxford and established themselves in Little James Street, he had been gradually realising, and trying to dodge, the fact that Jack and he had reached the crossroads. For months Jack's whole effort to get high marks in the final engineering examinations — how plainly he could see it now! — was in order to get the chance of leaping out to the other end of the world. He was like a hound on a leash, and now that he was a full-fledged member of an engineering firm, the leash might be slipped at any moment. And then, China! . . . Good old Jack, how overjoyed he would be! And perfectly rightly. It was a need, a call, a talent like his music. He had to go. But — and Tom frowned — it would be sort of damned lonely without him!

He came to the admission slowly, grudgingly. But while he told himself that it was a weakness, that his own life was going to be so full that there wouldn't be any time for anything so idiotic as missing Jack, deep down in him he knew that Jack's going would leave a frightful hole. It was a long hunt to find anybody like Jack. In fact, as far back as he could remember, there never had been anybody like him, — anybody who could fit in so exactly, who liked the same things at the same time, who was always so amazingly ready, who anticipated a meaning before it was half uttered and was there with the reply

you wanted. Through all their days they had been hand and glove, like two sides of the same medal, essential to one another. What would he have done in St. Malo without Jack? Or in Germany? And Oxford wouldn't have been half the fun if Jack hadn't been there to compare notes with, to organise plans with and for, to have pulling behind him in the same boat. . . . He hadn't realised. He had taken it so damnably for granted. One always did. But why must this accursed lust for wandering be rooted in his soul? Why couldn't he feel the spell of London? Why must he go off and smash everything sky high?

The opening of the door into the gigantic beer hall let out a wave of fuggy air, a composite of alcohol, tobacco, wet clothes and sawdust. The first shock of it was perhaps a little strong, but after a few paces down the room it became friendly and warm and supremely desirable after the raw wetness of the streets.

The two brothers hung up their dripping Burberrys, found a table and ordered two bocks. Jack told the waiter to bring *L'Illustration* and *Simplicissimus*.

Tom was still frowningly loading his pipe when the beer was brought. How many more times would they come here together? Oh, well . . . He reached out and picked up his glass. "I hate your blasted China!" he said with the best he could do in the way of a grin. "But here's hoping you'll get the job!"

Taken by surprise, Jack's eyes went to his brother's face. The meaning was there. "Thanks, old man!" he said quietly. "And here's to a million fat briefs for you!"

The two glasses clinked.

Chapter Two

THE Suez Canal was still at the bottom of the garden. It was a muddy trickle now, with a tangle of weeds choking the waterway more effectually than the lock had ever done.

The ancient gardener who came in two days a week had wanted to fill it up, but Mother had restrained him, briefly, firmly, and without reasons given. One didn't have to explain why first pairs of shoes had their allotted place in a certain drawer, even if that drawer was never, or hardly ever, opened. It was the same reason, however, which led to the bottom left-hand shelf in the library being filled now with much-thumbed copies of Henty and Fenimore Cooper and Rider Haggard, since they had been elbowed out of the boys' rooms by Anatole France, Nietzsche, Balzac, Rabelais, Goethe, and a medley of French "yellow backs" which grew in piles and were added to every time they came home for a week's end.

From time to time new chintzes had been put on chairs and sofas; and out in the garden little pine trees, whose planting had been a matter of breathless excitement to two small boys in knickers, now made a dense patch of blue shade on the other side of the brook. Other than that the only change — and this was beyond Mother's regulation — was that the house had shrunk to its real size. In knicker days

the staircases had been endless links between one world and another, each room so huge that when Jack was busy in one corner and Tom in another, they had to shout so that their voices wouldn't be deflected by the ranges of mountains that intervened; while outside, the distance from the house to the brook — across the lawn and through the shrubbery and round the kitchen garden and then all along the stretch of baby pines and the bracken jungle where there might be a lion or a tiger — was so great that it was always better to take provisions in each pocket. You never could tell! There might be a sandstorm in the desert of Nevada, or a smash-up when their canoe was going down the rapids; or they might have to make a three-day detour through virgin woods on account of a washout to the roadbed: and then, if they had been tenderfeet enough not to bring their strips of jerked meat, why they would just starve to death before help could possibly come!

Sometimes now, when Tom was standing back to the fire, pipe in teeth, holding forth at length on any one of a dozen subjects, or when Jack got out of the armchair, apparently filling the room with his height and breadth, some trick of vision would make Mother see them in knickers again for one intense moment, so clearly and so actually that almost . . . almost . . . Father would be there too.

And then the vision would depart, and Mother would smile in case either of them should have happened to notice, saying in an inner voice, "You were right, my dear! And if you were proud of them then, look at them now! You'll help me keep them, won't you?"

Whereupon, if Jack had stopped playing, she would go over to the piano and say, "Look, Jack, I've unearthed a new song for you. It's one of the loveliest things you ever heard."

And although now he could play everything with a touch that she could never acquire, nine times out of ten Jack would make room for her on the piano stool and say, "Great work, Mother! Show me how it goes."

Then too, strong in her belief in self-help, she had brushed up on her game of chess, so that if he would give her a knight or a bishop, Tom would have to work quite hard to beat her. In their work, of course, they were so far beyond her that it was impossible to ask even intelligent questions. All that was left to her there was to applaud, or to sympathize with results. With Tom the way was clear. He would go on being in London, and even though he probably underfed himself during the week, it was only a brief two hours home by train, and she knew so well what he liked. And if at any time she really needed him, she had only to pick up the telephone. No, Tom was not really a worry at all. It was Jack for whom she must steel herself, Jack to whom she must go on pretending that China was undoubtedly the most desirable country in the world. First, it had been St. Malo, — "Like it? It's magnificent!" he had said; then Germany. Now his heart was set on China. There was no argument possible. Argument would only lose him, destroy everything they had built up. All she could do to keep him was to let him go, with the mask of cheerfulness glued to her face, and fear preying on her soul, — fear of everything, of nothing, of the

simple fact that he was somewhere where she couldn't know that he was all right. It was that not knowing which made bed so terrifying before sleep came to her rescue; which crept in so insidiously, so treacherously, during the most busy moment of the day, extinguishing the sun until she could tear herself free again. . . . Java, India, Alaska, South America, and worse than all, Japan! Father had taught her to plumb the lonely depths of each one of them. And now it was Jack's turn. . . .

Chapter Three

It was still raining the morning after their visit to the beer hall, but they met at the entrance to the platform to catch the one o'clock train. On Saturdays it was always crowded, but there was generally a chance of a corner seat with a folding table by going right forward, almost next to the engine, where they could face each other, pipe in teeth, and forget time and space over a travelling chess board.

To-day was no exception and, by the time the train had steamed through the unsavoury purlieus that are a disease broken out upon the flanks of all big cities, and London in particular, Tom had led off, much to Jack's disgust, with the Muzio gambit, — that chancy opening in chess which, in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon solidity of Lasker's, is a convincing expression of the reputed subtlety of the Latin mind.

Neither of them was aware, except subconsciously, of the draggled, water-logged countryside, whose cheerlessness was only relieved by the wisps of amethyst smoke that curled up from cottage chimneys, telling of crackling wood fires within, of armchairs pulled up, the cat asleep on one's knee, of chestnuts being roasted, of the kettle singing in anticipation of tea: telling also, to the less sentimental eye, of frustrated business men denied once more their Saturday afternoon golf, their tempers a little on edge, taking it out by ponderous sarcasms at the expense

of their wives and by exasperated slappings of unfortunate children who had no place to play in, wishing to goodness they had stayed in town and gone to a show, or had dropped in at the Metropole for a game of billiards with the marker, — anything rather than be mewed up in that damned matchbox of a cottage which they always knew was a mistake from the very beginning. The chess board hid both the fact and the fiction.

Jack, having declined the gambit, succeeded in entrenching himself solidly behind a defensive position that was giving Tom most furiously to think, — giving also the fidgets to an old gentleman who sat beside him and who, ostensibly, was deep in an evening paper. Being English, the last thing that he would have cared — or dared — to do would have been to drop the paper and ask if he might watch the game. As it was, he held the paper stiffly in front of him and, out of the corners of his eyes, watched every move with increasing nervousness, darting quick looks at Tom, which said as plainly as words, "For the love of God, sir, why don't you advance queen bishop to queen bishop five?" And when Tom made that very move, the old gentleman's face relaxed and he peered round the edge of his paper at Jack, covertly, but triumphantly. His lips didn't move, but he was most evidently saying to himself, "Ah! Now we shall see!"

Not until the train slowed down at the approach to their station did some inner instinct pierce their concentration. Tom's head came up with a snap, as though something had jerked it. "This is us!" he said. "Great game! Let's finish it this evening."

"Eh? . . . Oh!" said Jack. "Right! It's my

move." He folded the board, locking the pieces in position, and slid it into the pocket of his Burberry.

The old gentleman maintained his stoic silence. There was not even a look of regret in his eyes as they got out. It had been interesting while it lasted, that was all. White would win, undoubtedly, although black had put up a remarkable defense. Well, well! . . . Nobody getting into the compartment, thank heaven!

The sprawling old county town at which Tom and Jack got out still boasted a marketplace, on one wall of which were a few letters of the original Roman inscription. Its pillars, vaulted roof and watering trough were intact; and every Saturday, until late into the night, hucksters, who had come, apparently, from nowhere, and disappeared again completely when the market was over, sold every imaginable and unimaginable article, secure against the weather by the forethought of their one-time conquerors.

There was also an inn, grown a little down at heel, now that the four-in-hand was a thing of the past; but the beauty of its carved oak panels and the high, huge-beamed balcony in the yard remained undimmed, in spite of rough usage and neglect. Its massive sign, crudely painted on oak and hung in an iron frame hammered out by a blacksmith whose name has been immortalised in engravings and records of the early prize ring, had survived the rains and winds of two centuries. Its once bright colors were a mere blur, but the inn's proud name, "The Lord Debenham Arms," had been inscribed on the wall in commercial paint of the present day.

The other principal attraction was also the out-

come of conquest by invaders, — a Norman church, the lines of which had suffered nothing during the process of being wrenched by one fighting sect from the hands of another. There were accounts of monks cut down upon its altar steps in the name of God, their bodies flung out to rot in the gutters; of others being led out from its quiet walls and burned to death in the marketplace.

It was now the living of a Church of England parson, once a Fellow of Wadham, and his Cheltenham wife, a spinster, even though boasting the insignia of matrimony. She had money, which was why Wadham had married her, and so they drove a dog-cart and gave decorous garden parties; and after dinner, not without a certain ritual, the reverend gentleman indulged in a bottle of port, turning his glass this way and that, admiring its ruby color.

Once when Tom and Jack were very small, Father had been dragged there, groaning and protesting, to dine. Mother's final argument had won. "You won't see them again for months, but I have to know them when you're away!" After the meal, still laboring under the spirit of coercion, Father dropped the remark that the color of that excellent wine was the exact shade of the blood of those other clerics whose cure had been so much more precarious than his host's. The remark, as such, was not one of his best, was even in the nature of a platitude; but to that gentle soul whose God, like his port, had mellowed with the years, no longer demanding the final sacrifice on the part of His ministers, it had seemed to convey, although he couldn't quite put his finger on it, a certain disrespect for the Established Church. Un-

willing both by nature and by profession to join issue, he had employed a method of evasion highly successful with most of his parishioners, — a solemn nodding, a benign smile, and the utterance of a Latin tag, of which he had a dozen or more on tap, all familiar ones so that his audience might recognize them. In this occasion he brought out, *"O tempora! O mores!"*

And Father had smiled too, at Mother; and, from that time on, the family had always referred to him as the Reverend Tag. The day school from which Father had, in the opinion of the local schoolmaster, "dragged the boys to fling them so radically upon the foreign shore of France," was on the outskirts of the town, and so, from having bicycled in day after day for several years, there was not an inch of its topography which was not a part of them. In the wildest wilds of China, Jack would have been able to close his eyes and follow every twist and turn, see the faces of every shopkeeper along both sides of the rambling High Street, and of the two policemen who took it turn and turn about to stand with great dignity at the four corners, watching the world go by.

This afternoon as they came out of the station, the driver of one of the two horse cabs grinned and raised his whip in salute. "Afternoon, Mr. Tom! Afternoon, Mr. Jack!"

"Hullo there, Dusty!" said Tom. "Why the deuce don't you make it stop raining?" He opened the door and dropped his bag on the front seat.

"Dusty" Miller jerked his head, scattering a little pool of rain that had collected in the brim of his

rusty tall hat. "Proper Nor Zark weather this is! Bin keepin' well, gentlemen?"

Tom was already halfway into the cab, so Jack answered. "Yes, thanks. You look as if it agreed with you."

"All excep' me knee, thankin' you kindly. This damp gives it the twinges."

"Too bad!" said Jack. "However, this stuff can't last for ever."

He dived in quickly before the story of the knee and Mafeking should begin for the thousandth time.

A little chagrined at being denied one of his chief pleasures, ex-cavalry sergeant "Dusty" Miller, a relic of the Boer War, gathered up his reins and chirruped to his battered nag. The three-mile jog was a slow business, but at last the old horse's head was jerked around into the driveway that led to the house.

"I expect Dusty's got an awful thirst on him by now," said Tom. "Let's give him a couple of shillings over his fare, poor old devil!"

"Rather!" said Jack. "It ought to cure the twinges!" A moment later he leaned out, waved and called, "Hullo, Mother!"

It was a part of the ritual of home-coming to see her standing at the door as they drove up, unless, as occasionally happened, one of them was detained at the office and they came down on the late train. So while Tom parted from the cabdriver with mutual expressions of esteem, Jack hauled the two bags inside and kissed his mother.

"Tea's all ready," she said. "We had just sat down."

Jack's eyebrows went up. "We?" He said it in a whisper because the drawing-room door was open.

Mother smiled. "Go in and see!"

With a frown of annoyance at the prospect of some visitor's having picked out that particular day to come and make an inane "call," Jack left his mother as she turned to answer Tom's "Hullo," and walked into the drawing-room.

As usual, the tea table was on the right side of the fire, where Mother always sat to pour out. It was so familiar that Jack's eye didn't have to pause to take it in. It went straight to the other armchair, Tom's armchair, in which a girl sat smiling up at him. Jack's eyes flickered.

"Hullo, Jack!" said the girl. And then after a tiny pause, she laughed and went on, "How perfectly beastly of you! You haven't the faintest idea who I am! I can see it in your face." She held out her hand. "Come a little nearer and take a real look!"

Jack smiled. He was already taking a real look. Her voice was drawly and soft, and there was an air of quiet enjoyment about her which he liked. He went forward and took her hand, smiling down into her brown, twinkling eyes whose lashes were long and curly, like her hair, which went back in unruly waves from a wide forehead. Her skin was milky white. Jack itched to touch it, to see for himself if it didn't feel like velvet. He liked her clothes too. They were not the tweed coat and skirt affected by most Englishwomen in the country. They were silk, black, obviously Paris, very feminine. Her only jewel was an opal, gleaming at the base of her throat as if a tiny fire had been lit there.

For perhaps twenty seconds their hands touched, while his memory went climbing back over the years.

She must have seen the recognition come into his eyes, for she said, "Well?"

"Not merely well," said Jack, "but perfectly lovely! Good heavens, Molly, how on earth did you do it?" Hearing the others at the door, he half turned and called out, "Hi! Tom! If you want a very pleasant shock, come and look here!"

As Tom followed his mother in, the girl scrambled to her feet, her head coming about on a level with Jack's shoulder. For a moment Tom frowned at her, completely baffled. Then he exclaimed, "Molly Prescott, by Jove!" He went forward and shook her hand. "The last time we saw each other your hair was in pigtails."

Molly's eyes went from one to the other. "And you were both in sailor suits with flapping blue collars and a white anchor in each corner. You came to my party" . . . she smiled at Jack . . . "and hated it!"

"Lord!" said Jack. "I thought I was the only one who remembered that." He could see himself furiously wiping off the kiss that she had given him; and, from the amused gleam in her eyes, he knew that she had not forgotten that detail either. That was all it was, a mere detail, kid stuff: but standing there now, it became on the instant something very private, not at all to be dragged out and paraded and laughed over.

For the moment they were all caught in one of those holes in the conversation that no one is apparently ready to fill in.

To his own surprise, the pause found Jack poised

in suspense. Was she going to blurt out the rest of the story? If so, it was all over, as far as he was concerned. She would label herself as nothing more than a loose-mouthed idiot. And yet, if she did, it would be passionately disappointing. Not for the world would he move hand or foot, however, or utter a sound, to prevent her doing so. It was essential to find out which kind of girl she was.

Neither Tom nor Mother was aware that any drama was going on. Tom sat looking at Molly with an appreciative eye, and Mother had begun to pour out the tea. To all outward seeming Jack was never more normal. He stood, hands in pockets, a smile at the corners of his lips, quietly rocking on his heels.

Then at last Molly broke the silence. "I wonder whether we've all changed as much inside as we have out?"

As though a spring had released him, Jack wheeled away from her. He didn't want her to see that he was fiercely glad, — Lord only knew why! But she had passed the test. She was all right. She was inside. . . . He went over to the tea table and stood beside his mother, ready to carry teacups and sugar and cake, as though it were the most casual tea party in the world. But he would have given everything he had to sit down then and there at the piano and make the most gorgeous music, — just like when that funny little French kid had clasped his hand during the procession. Queer, that he should remember that now! If only he could tell it to Molly! He half turned, then checked himself with a laugh.

"What's your little joke, Jack?" asked Mother.

Jack blinked, her voice came from so far away.

"Oh, nothing," he said. "I was just thinking about St. Malo, Mother, that's all." He took the cup from her hand and went and put it on the arm of Molly's chair. "Milk or sugar?" As he put the query, he smiled at the thought that five minutes ago he would have said to her, "How do you like your tea, Molly? Will you have milk or sugar?" The whole thing was so different now.

"Both, please!" said Molly, and went on answering Tom's questions.

They had begun while Jack was bound up in himself, so he listened now to catch up.

"So after I left school," said Molly; "and by that time you were both at Oxford, I went to Paris, to the Beaux Arts, and . . ."

"Oh, splendid!" interrupted Jack. "We can all jabber French together! Of course, I might have known! . . . How long did you stay there?"

"I've only just come back," said Molly.

"What did you do at the Beaux Arts?" asked Tom. "Sculpture or painting?"

"Painting," said Molly.

"And now what? Are you over for a holiday, or back for good?"

"For good. Dad's built me a studio out in the garden and I'm going to work like mad!"

Tom nodded. "Excellent! I should love to see your stuff one day."

"Righto," said Molly. "You can come over tomorrow if you like. It's all stacked in a corner for anybody who likes to pull it out. Incidentally, I want your mother to sit. We were talking about it before you came. You will, won't you, Mrs. Ingleside?"

"Better say yes, Mother," said Tom. "This is opportunity knocking at the door!"

It was a new experience for Mrs. Ingleside to sit and see another woman occupy the attention of her two sons, even though the "other woman" was merely the little girl who had grown up next door and whose mother and father had been her very good friends before this child was born.

On the various occasions when the boys had brought back the sisters of their Oxford friends for week-ends, the quality of their attention had been very different from this afternoon. Then it had been a certain casual badinage, friendly banter without any roots under it. It had left her a little puzzled, not altogether unpleased, at the fact that neither boy's equilibrium had as yet been seriously disturbed. This afternoon, however, she was not so sure. For one thing, there was not, as yet, any of that verbal tennis which they played with the others. They were treating this girl as an equal, — even Tom, whose fault, if he had one, was to be the least bit intellectually intolerant. Perhaps this was to be explained by the fact that they had shared the same background as children, which gave them unconsciously a firm basis of acquaintance in spite of the twelve years' interval since they had seen one another. On the other hand, Molly had grown into a really beautiful girl. It would be worth while to keep an eye on her, to size her up. . . . Her thinking was interrupted by Molly's question, a repetition of the request which she had made before the boys arrived. Then she had been on the point of smilingly refusing. Now it seemed to offer precisely the opportunity she needed.

Serenely she looked at Molly over the tea table. "Heaven knows why you want to paint a portrait of me," she said, "but if you really do, my dear, I shall be delighted."

"Great work, Mother!" said Jack.

"Splendid!" said Molly.

Mother smiled. "Splendid"; that was Jack's word! Was it really this girl's too, or had she taken it on purpose?

"I should like to begin work on Monday," said Molly. "Is that all right for you? Could you come over to the studio at ten o'clock?"

Mother nodded. "Yes, I think I can manage that."

Molly rose to her feet. "Then that's all settled and I'm awfully grateful. . . . I must be running along."

"Absurd!" said Jack. "You can't possibly go now! . . . Besides," he added quickly, "it's raining cats and dogs."

Mother put down her teacup. "Why don't you telephone your mother and stay for dinner?"

"Good idea, Mother," said Jack. And then to Molly, "What's the number? I'll get it for you."

Molly shook her head. "It's awfully nice of you and I'd love to stay, but Mother's giving a dinner for me to-night so you see I've got to hurry back and change!"

"Well, in that case," said Jack, "I'll see you home. Where are your things?"

"Out in the hall," said Molly. She went over to Mrs. Ingleside and held out her hand. "It's so lovely to see you all again, and I can't tell you how pleased I am that you will sit for me! Good-bye. Till Mon-

day. . . . Good-bye, Tom. It's going to be my turn to ask questions next time!"

Tom smiled. "That'll be to-morrow then," he said. "I'm accepting your invitation to come and ransack the studio. What's the best time?"

"On Sundays I always have breakfast in bed," said Molly. "It's my only survival from Paris, even though I get bacon instead of *brioches*. Suppose you come along about eleven-thirty?"

"We'll be there," said Tom. For a moment he held her hand and then watched her as she went out into the hall where Jack was waiting with her waterproof and hat. When they had gone out and the door was closed behind them, Tom turned to his mother.

"Well," he said, "that was a surprise, wasn't it? The girl's got brains too! Shouldn't wonder if she really painted well. . . . How about another cup of tea?"

Mother was watching his face. "And don't you think she's very pretty?"

Tom's frown appeared. He nodded. "Dangerously so!" he said.

Chapter Four

THE rooms in Little James Street had been chosen because they were the cheapest within two minutes of Piccadilly Circus, and that, according to Tom, was the focal point of civilisation. The question of its being a slum was offset by the fact that most of its population and the whole of the rest of Soho was either Italian or French. There was something about it that suggested at least a cousinship to the Rue Saint Honoré. The smells were largely the same, of luscious cheese and aromatic cabbage, overpowered frequently by garlic; the narrow twistiness of the alleys that went off in every direction like the strands of a spider's web; and the prevailing Latin note in the continuous babel of sound.

Occasionally there were paragraphs in the newspapers of men stabbed with knives there; but these blood-lettings were, after all, only in the performance of some private vendetta, and Tom and Jack came and went unmolested.

Their life was in some respects a continuation of that which they had led at Oxford, a matter of deliberate planning. At Oxford, Tom's forward-thinking brain had sized up conditions in the first term and he had decreed that work was the great interference, that the only way to suck Oxford dry was to keep morning lectures and then from midday to midnight devote themselves to doing everything else that was

to be done, athletically and socially. Work was for the vacations, a steady dingdong grind of not more than six hours a day.

If results mean anything, then his diagnosis was a successful one; for he had not only emerged from the Schools with a first-class honors degree, but had been captain of the college crew and had won his Trials cap in the Varsity Eight. Jack following his counsel with perfect confidence, had stroked the crew to victory at Henley, been runner-up in the Diamonds, and had captured a second in the final examinations.

In Little James Street the same brain was soon in evidence. As Tom phrased it, "The elements of the good life are to work like hell, to be as hard as nails, to keep your friends, to know what's happening outside your job, and, last, but by no means least, to see that Mother's all right. Simple! The rest I haven't any use for!"

So they developed a routine which, although flexible, was rarely broken. By day, of course, each went to his office. That was the job, the thing that really mattered, to which everything else must be subordinated. It became not less important, however, to see that the evenings did not degenerate into mere periods of slackness. Nobody ever got ahead by doing that. On Mondays therefore they went down to a large boxing club in the city in order to keep lean and fit. Tuesdays meant an early dinner, a return to the rooms and work till midnight. Wednesdays were for the theatre. Thursdays were purely social. Either they dined with friends or dined them, going back afterwards to the "digs", where there was always port, the piano and much talking. On Fridays they

worked again, and on Saturdays they went home for the week-end.

Their week-ends meant a round of golf on Sunday — they got home too late to be able to play on Saturday — much music for Jack, sundry games of chess between Tom and his mother, and the devouring of the latest books, sent down weekly from a London library. Mother had given up dining with the Vicar and his wife, and, until the return of Molly, her contact with the Prescotts had, for many years, lapsed almost completely. Consequently, except when the two boys brought back friends, they were dependent upon their own resources.

Mother, naturally, was completely satisfied. But for the two brothers there were, equally naturally, moments during the short January days when time dragged. Youth is drama, the drama of discovery, of the pains of repression, of the wild joy of each leaf won in the laurels of success. The intermediary moments, when none of these factors seems to be in operation, are inevitably abhorrent.

To Jack especially, with his mind set on China — his first prospective job of responsibility and therefore the keystone of his whole future — every day that passed without his being summoned to the room of the head of the firm to receive his sailing orders was a wasted day; and as he was in the position of not being able to talk about it, either to Tom or Mother, because they both hated the idea of his going, the relief afforded by chess or golf became from time to time completely inadequate. The boxing ring on Mondays was helpful, even when, on two occasions, he took a knock-out as the price of having got

reckless, — two good fights while they lasted, a completely satisfying letting-off of steam; and after all a knock-out, whether you got it or gave it, lent that touch of drama which is essential to life.

Nevertheless, the fires which generated that steam went on burning in spite of all the factitious bankings. There were unconfessed moments in Tom's life when a passing face stood out from the crowd and haunted him for days, until by a sheer effort of will he had sponged it out of his mind, and plunged into work with every ounce of concentration. And was not Jack's "sympathy" for the girl in the office a mild manifestation of the same urge? No boy who had dreamed of King Arthur and the Round Table could grow up without keeping a weather eye open for his own Guinevere, however stoutly he might deny it aloud.

The advent of Molly Prescott was like putting a keg of dynamite under the walls of the fort. Jack's defenses came down in ruins. The good life, with its simple definition, went up in smoke. He came back from seeing her home in the rain a changed man, a man with a padlocked face, so that no one might see Molly inside, especially not Molly herself. He himself was hardly aware of what had happened, but he knew perfectly the firmness and coolness of her hands, the cocky tilt of her chin, the balance of her body as she walked, the neat way she had of lacing her shoes, the fascinating sheen of the stockings she wore, the trick she had of twisting the opal ring on the little finger of her left hand, and, more than all these things, the quality of individuality, that indescribable element, which looked out of her eyes and made her Molly, made him hate to say good-night, resentful towards those beastly people who were going to

monopolize her all the evening, which made the house, when he got back, so full of restlessness that he could not remain still, even at the piano. When at last Tom urged him to finish the game of chess that they had brought back from the train, it was almost as if that game had been begun in another life. In four moves he threw away the position that had resisted Tom's attack for two hours and got up with relief to let his mother start a new one.

"What's happened?" asked Tom. "You were a thousand miles away."

Jack flushed and dived under cover. "Farther than that," he said. "China. . . . For some reason I've rather got it on my mind to-night. You go ahead and wipe the floor with him, Mother. I'm going out for a breather."

"But it's still raining hard!" said Mother.

Jack swallowed. "I know!" he said. "It never seems to do anything else. I'll change when I come in." And without another word he stalked out into the hall, pulled on a waterproof and plunged into the comforting solitude of the dreary, wet night.

It was only a half lie to give China as the excuse. It was in his mind, a picture over which Molly's had suddenly been superimposed. It presented now an entirely different outline. Molly and China! Molly or China? China without Molly. . . . Molly and to blazes with China! No, that was absurd. Without China there could be no Molly, unless he could get a plum in England. And that was absurd too. There weren't any plums in England, not for a beginner. Only the fellow whose reputation had been established for fifty years could get any decent jobs in England. The country was too old, too settled. And they dis-

trusted the new man. Even Father had had to get out. Therefore China, and Molly afterwards. How long afterwards? He might have to stay out there for years. . . . Gosh, Tom was a lucky devil! Not only had he the temperament to be satisfied with London, but he had picked a job at which the maximum of success could be got there.

Pretty easy to talk about the good life under those conditions, especially when he was so wrapped up in his future that he was absolutely unaware of girls. What was it he had said? Something about its having to be a pretty stout Venus to claw her way through. That was it. He had probably dismissed Molly already, if he had even really looked at her, which was doubtful. . . . How wonderful she was! How marvellously . . .

He came out of his raptures to find that he was about to pass her house. He stopped in the muddy road and stared over the hedge at the windows. The blinds were down, and only chinks of light from their edges told him that those frightful people were still there. Suppose he went up and asked to see her? They'd all be in dress clothes, of course, but wasn't there any reason he could think up? Couldn't he invent some message from his mother? . . . He racked his brain; at last gave an amused grin at himself. There was only one reason, — that he wanted to sit like a sloppy idiot and look at Molly, be in the same room with her. . . . Oh, rats! Time he pulled himself together!

As though caught in the act, he felt a flush of embarrassment burning his cheeks. He turned quickly and splashed along back, glad of the rain in his face.

Chapter Five

FROM her slightly elevated position on the model's throne Mrs. Ingleside silently studied the figure of Molly. She did not speak for the simple reason that she was not allowed to.

It had been her impression that a sitting for an artist was a highly sociable business, an hour of continual conversation and laughter. Much to her surprise, and, as she admitted now, admiration, Molly had effaced that impression, almost roughly, at the first sitting.

"Please don't talk," she had said. "It takes all the concentration I've got to put you on canvas. That's why I asked you to bring a book. . . . We'll talk during rest periods."

Upon which, it seemed to Mrs. Ingleside that the smiling girl who had welcomed her to the studio twenty minutes previously disappeared, and in her place stood a tense, silent creature who stared at her with hard eyes and a frown.

When, finally, Molly had decreed that she get up and walk about to ease tired muscles, Mrs. Ingleside saw the girl reach out for a cigarette and inhale the smoke in hungry gulps as she stood in front of her canvas and glared at it. When she spoke, it became apparent that only half her mind was free.

It was not until the sitting was over that the girl became Molly again, by a deliberate effort of will,

and set herself to entertain her model. Mrs. Ingleside had walked home in a condition of surprised bewilderment that only became keen interest after two more sessions on that silent throne.

She had to confess that she owed Molly a mental apology. Her expectation had been to sit to a charming dilettante who would squeeze out oils upon her palette with the delicately curled little finger without which no teacup can be raised to the lips in polite society: in other words, that Molly's painting would turn out to be, like so many girls' music, a mere drawing-room exhibit cultivated for the express purpose of luring the younger members of the opposite sex, with a hopeful Mama in the background as press agent and impresario.

Quite humbly Mrs. Ingleside took it all back. She found that no member of the family, or any other family, was allowed in the studio while Molly was working. Her overalls, although cleaned, were much faded and patched, for use and not for show. The studio itself was bare of any feminine note. It was as starkly professional as the operating theatre of a hospital, and Molly functioned therein with the assured precision of a chief surgeon. The analogy was the more admissible from the charcoal studies of legs, arms, abdomens and busts, both male and female, that occupied a huge portfolio on a side table.

To the lay mind of Mrs. Ingleside it was impossible to look at them and then at Molly without all sorts of odd questions springing up. She tried to imagine herself as a young girl staring at naked men and trying to draw them. What effect would it have had upon her? What effect had it had upon Molly?

No one could live that abnormal studio life without turning the fine edge of sensibility. At that price was the gaining of a knowledge of line justified? As philosophic questions Mrs. Ingleside was unable to answer them. As questions relating to this individual girl, she was determined to try and obtain the answers.

It was not until the portrait was half done that she felt able to try and get at Molly. Although neither of them hitherto had done anything more than make conversation, the daily propinquity had had its effect. They had grown used to each other, had come to know something of each other's habits. A relationship, however slight, had been definitely established.

This morning as Molly said, "There! That's all!" and laid down her palette and put her collection of brushes into the jar of turpentine, Mrs. Ingleside came down from the throne and joined the girl in front of the canvas.

"My dear," she said, "I think it's really brilliant! When are you going to let any one see it?"

Molly grinned and reached for a cigarette. "You mean Tom and Jack? . . . Not till it's finished. It's perfectly fatal to listen to amateur suggestions. But I'd give more than a little to have Monsieur Merthault from the Beaux Arts in here for ten minutes! That nose has been giving me the devil for three days!"

Mrs. Ingleside laughed. "It looks very familiar to me," she said.

Molly was gazing at it through half-closed eyes. "Oh, as far as that's concerned, it's your nose, all right, but it lacks just a touch somewhere, and I can't quite get it, confound it!"

"You make me feel as though I were a case in a public ward," said Mrs. Ingleside.

Molly turned to her with an appreciative laugh. "Well, in a sense you are!"

Mrs. Ingleside laid her hand for a moment on the girl's arm. "D' you know, my dear," she said, "I used to think that Tom had a monopoly on concentration. I know better now."

Molly nodded. "I thought he seemed pretty keen that day they came here to look over the studio. I suppose he'll be a K.C. one of these days."

"Just as certainly as you will be an R.A." said Mrs. Ingleside.

Molly screwed up her nose. "I'm aiming at the Salon!" she said drily.

"Is that because you were in Paris so long?"

Molly flicked her cigarette ash on to the floor. What was the use of telling Mrs. Ingleside that in comparison with the Salon the Royal Academy didn't count. She wouldn't understand what it was all about. "Yes, I suppose it is," she said. "You see, art over there is considered so utterly differently."

Mrs. Ingleside nodded. "You must have had a marvellous time at the Beaux Arts."

"Rather!" said Molly. "I wouldn't give up those five years for anything!"

"All the same," continued Mrs. Ingleside, "didn't you find it a rather queer life there? Weren't all those foreigners a little difficult? You must have had a hard time getting used to their habits."

One of Molly's eyebrows went up, rather in the manner of a terrier cocking one ear, not quite sure of the sound it has heard. Was Mrs. Ingleside trying to

pump her? She laughed. "Oh, well, I must admit they were a priceless collection. There were Russians and Poles and Germans, everything in Europe. But the common language was French, so we all got along splendidly."

"Did you have any English girl friends?" Mrs. Ingleside went on, feeling her way very gently.

"Yes," said Molly, "one or two." Then a twinkle came into her eyes and she looked squarely at Mrs. Ingleside. "But it wouldn't have been nearly so much fun if the men hadn't made love to us!"

She had expected to see a shocked expression come into Mrs. Ingleside's face. Instead of that Mrs. Ingleside said quietly, "I'm surprised that you managed to escape getting married."

She said it so gently and earnestly that Molly instantly felt apologetic. She became serious at once. "Oh no," she said. "They couldn't have got married. They hadn't any money. And besides, it was the last thing they were thinking of. As a matter of fact, the serious ones, and there were a lot of them, worked like the dickens and didn't bother with us. But some of the others did fall violently in love and lived together very happily for sometimes as long as six months. Then they parted company for any one of a hundred reasons. Those central Europeans are extraordinarily temperamental. Perhaps that's why they're so marvellous at painting. I don't know. . . ." Molly sighed, shrugged her shoulders, gave a little laugh and looked up at Mrs. Ingleside again. "I'll make a confession to you," she said. "There were times when I used to wish that I weren't so horribly English, that I could live the sort of life they wanted

me to. I'm perfectly certain it would have helped my work! But there was always a stupid drawing back, a sense of . . . fear, I suppose it was, if you boil it down far enough. The results of my upbringing and forbears! Whatever it was, it was too strong for me. I could never escape from it. So I decided that I wasn't cut out for the other thing, and here I am!"

For a moment the two women looked at each other.

Then Mrs. Ingleside put her hands on the girl's shoulders and kissed her. "And I'm very glad you are here!" she said. "Any time you feel like bothering with an old lady like me, you'll find a very warm welcome, my dear!"

"Thank you," said Molly. "You'll find that I won't forget that!"

Chapter Six

In the weeks that followed, Tom became gradually aware that the atmosphere of the rooms in Little James Street was undergoing a change.

It was difficult to put his finger on it, and yet it was most uncomfortably there, — as vague but as unpleasant as that premonitory condition of health which is generally described as "coming down with" something. It was Jack who was "coming down" with whatever it was and the symptoms were worrying. At times he was the same ready stable-mate, as exactly in tune as ever. And then, without warning, he seemed to fall victim to a mental withdrawal, a lassitude, which turned him, for the time being, into a comparative stranger. It was as though a cloud were passing over him, leaving him in deep shadow; as though the current between them had been turned off.

Tom became aware, too, that his own reaction to these troughs of preoccupation was taking the form of irritability. It was absurd to have Jack sit on the other side of the table eating in silence, and to get nothing but a monosyllable or a vague nod in answer to one of his best efforts. He found himself making use of the weapon of sarcasm, — and hating himself for it. It was rather like hitting a man who wasn't looking; and it was unimaginable that he and Jack should ever have to hit each other.

Not one of the friends who came to drink their port

was aware of underground disturbance. They found Tom as alert as ever and Jack to all appearances his normal self, so much so that one night, in the middle of the depression, one of them nodded with a warm and immediately reminiscent smile as he had come down the steps into the street and said, "Pretty stout fellows, those Heavenly Twins, aren't they?"

Another, equally familiar with the nickname that had stuck to them from Oxford days, added his mite of non-observation. "Yes. They have the gift of perfect coördination."

They did not know that up in the room they had just left, a slump had set in, a let-down, which checked conversation and made Jack say as he closed the piano, "Well . . . bed, I think. Don't you?"

The remark itself was natural enough, for it was verging upon one o'clock; but up to now it had been their habit to smoke a final pipe after their last guest had wended his way down the stairs, to compare notes on the evening, to ask one another, "Did you hear what old So-and-So said . . . ?" until finally, with many yawns, they made a mutual move towards their bedrooms, only to go on talking as they undressed.

This made the second time that Jack had caused a break in the rhythm. Tom had his hand in the tobacco jar. He looked quickly at Jack, puzzled, a little annoyed. "You must be getting old!" he said. "Why this urge for bed? Aren't we going to have the usual nightcap?"

Jack shook his head. "Not to-night," he said. "I'm doggo. I'm going to turn in. . . . G'night!"

Tom struck a match and through the ensuing clouds

watched his brother put pipe in one pocket and tobacco pouch in another, look round for the book he was reading, tuck it under his arm and go across the room to his bedroom. Just as the door was about to shut he said, "Good-night, Jack!"

There was no answer.

Tom sat down on the sofa, his legs stretched out to the fire. "What the hell's wrong?" he muttered. "He's gone off to read in bed. . . . This thing's been creeping up for quite a while."

His eyebrows puckered as he stared into the fire and began to work back day by day to see if he could trace it to a determinable cause.

Last night they had been to a show and afterwards to Gambrinus for a beer. The beer — come to think of it — had been a little hurried. Then too on Monday at the boxing club there had been a sort of unholy joy, a repressed grimness, in the way he had set about that lad from the Stock Exchange as though he were taking something out on him. And at that he had been reluctant to go to the club at all. The same grimness had marked Tuesday evening, when they both stayed in and worked. To-night he had been cheery enough all the evening, and yet, as soon as they were alone, he had seemed to die down, to become extinguished, to retire to some distant corner of himself and stick up a barbed-wire fence all round. . . . Was it still China? Had the delay got on his nerves? He had said it was worrying him that night at home when he had stalked out into the rain and come back like a drowned rat. But, after all, it wasn't like Jack to let a thing prey on him for any length of time. He was too healthy. He always threw it off and tackled some-

thing else. Nothing neurotic about him, thank God! No, the China job might contribute some element in this present unrest, but it couldn't be the whole story. There was some added reason, some new factor since then.

Tom scratched around in his mind. Nothing, as far as he knew, had changed in the office, and certainly nothing in Little James Street. Back at home . . . why, of course, there was Molly, but . . . Molly?

Tom sat up. The movement didn't seem to be enough. He rose and walked up and down, tobacco smoke swirling after him. Suppose it was Molly! . . . He dug his hands into his pockets, unaware of how the muscles in his jaw suddenly betrayed the pressure that he was putting on his pipe stem. . . . He saw Molly as he walked into the drawing-room, as she said good-bye and went out, as she talked about her canvases in the studio the following morning. And Jack? Jack had seen her home, — and then gone out to brood over China! And in the studio he had made himself polite, tried out her French for a short while and had then shut up like a clam. There had been hardly another word out of him. More than that, apart from the single remark on the way back that her painting was "damned good", Jack had never mentioned her again except to say yes or no to a mention of Molly by Mother or himself. Then, a fortnight later, when she had come to dinner on Saturday night, it was Molly and himself who had done all the talking, while Jack, in answer to her asking him to play something, had gone over to the piano and stayed there, only asking her from time to time if she knew this piece or that. He hadn't seemed to want to

talk at all. That could hardly be said to suggest a vast interest in Molly!

As he reached that point, Tom's jaw muscles relaxed. He shook his head and muttered, "No, I don't see how it can possibly be Molly! And the betting is a million to one that he hasn't made a fool of himself with that girl in the office. If it had been that, I think he would have asked me about it. I know if I got into a tight corner of that sort I should ask him. We always have tackled things together . . . which makes it all the more odd that he hasn't opened up about this. And it only seems to hit him when we're alone. . . . Good lord! I wonder . . ."

His pacing stopped. He stood and stared at Jack's bedroom door, and presently, with embarrassment written all over him, reached out a hand and snapped off the light. For a moment he stood in the dying flicker of the fire, and then moved silently to the door of Jack's room. Keeping his voice low, so as not to wake him, he said, "You asleep, Jack?"

For a long moment there was no reply, nor any movement.

Tom was about to move away when Jack's answer came, wide awake.

"No. What's up?"

Tom opened the door and leaned into the darkness. "I say," he said. "You . . . you're not fed up with me about anything, are you?"

The bed springs creaked. "Fathead!" said Jack, with a sort of laugh. " 'Course not!"

Tom let out a breath of relief. "Good!" he said. "You had me wondering for a bit. Well . . . if there's anything I can do . . ."

"Thanks," said Jack. "If there had been, I would have let you know already."

Tom's pipe began to gurgle. "The damn thing's all bunged up," he said awkwardly, and then, "Won't those blasted people move in the matter of China?"

Jack snorted. "Lord knows!" he said. "I'm beginning to give up hope. They'll probably put me on to some sweet job of drains in a garden city suburb, I suppose!"

"Gosh!" said Tom. "Sounds like the type of case I've had to look up lately. It's all in the game though, damn it, and mercifully it can't last forever. . . . I'll buzz off to bed. Hope to heaven you'll fight your way round this thing pretty soon, whatever it is."

The door knob rattled in Tom's hands, but just as the door was on the point of closing he pushed it open again. "Oh, by the way!" he said, and cleared his throat.

"Yes?" said Jack.

"There's one other thing I'd like to ask you. . . ."

"Go ahead," said Jack.

"I was just wondering . . . You haven't, by any chance, got Molly on your mind?"

It seemed that time stood still.

The darkness hid the sudden rigidity of Jack's body.

Tom's pipe was silent.

Then at last Jack managed a laugh. "Molly? . . . Good God, no!"

Tom nodded. "That's all right then," he said quietly. "It would have complicated things rather, wouldn't it . . . Good night, old man."

This time the door closed.

Chapter Seven

THE assimilation of Molly was not easy.

Jack's desire to admit the word "love" in regard to her was scared into non-utterance by the bogies of race, of age, of tradition. There was also — and this was a large element in it — the whole background of growing up with Tom. There had always been standards to measure up to: that one must never be afraid, that girls were sloppy, that lying was a form of cowardice, that if one started a thing one had to finish it, — curious hard and fast dogmas, the origins of which were probably to be found in the occasions when, seated on hassocks on either side of the fire, they listened to the tale of Father's adventures.

It is conceivable that Father dressed up the story for his audience, for he was not altogether without guile. But there must have been an innate receptivity in the two children in addition to their hero worship or else they would not have translated these dogmas into an everyday personal religion which stood the test of many a tearful episode in the nursery and afterwards.

Tom, being the older, was always the one to formulate the rules of the road they must follow; and so, in Jack's mind, it was less Father who stood for the utterance of all wisdom than Tom who was its actual interpreter.

Even now, when the consideration of Molly occu-

pied the foreground of his mind, Jack, grown up as he was, was unable to throw off the weight of what Tom stood for in his own beliefs. . . . Hadn't Tom summed it up — with unusual temperateness — that night when he had come into the bedroom? It would "complicate things!" That was all he had said, but Jack knew Tom well enough to know exactly what that phrase meant. It meant that Tom thought he would be the most colossal damn fool in the world if he fell in love, first because falling in love was asinine unless you were in the position of being able to marry, and second because at this precise moment, when everything was in the making, it was the most ghastly admission of lack of control, and an interference, both mental and physical, which wrecked all concentration on the job in hand. And the worst of it was that he was absolutely right. Their creeds were identical. But right or wrong, creed or no creed, the fact of Molly had to be dealt with, and for the same reason that it had been impossible not to swim that incredible distance at St. Malo, so now it was out of the question to let Tom have any inkling of his state of mind. That was why, for the second time in his life, he had lied, played the coward. The first time he had lied they had both nearly drowned. This time . . . but that was ridiculous. Tom wasn't in this. The problem was his own.

All that was English in him made him agree with Tom, made him fight shy of analysing his emotions, left him hedged in by racial inhibitions that sent him to cover from everybody, especially himself. But the urge toward Molly was too fundamental, too biological, to be fobbed off by philosophy. And so, while the

English side of him was left floundering and spluttering, that side of him which had embraced St. Malo and all that was Gallic finally came to the rescue, dragged him outside his British self and cried aloud, *"Je t'adore! Tu es mignonne comme tout, et je t'aime! Je t'aime!"*

Like a prisoner hugging to his bosom the file that will give him liberty, Jack went through the days thinking about her in that blessed language which let him take Molly in his arms, metaphorically speaking, and call her "thou" with the glorious feeling that he wasn't making a fool of himself, that it was natural, right and wholly proper.

It was, however, only in his thoughts that Britain was defeated. In his actions he remained under the yoke of tradition and his own deplorable common sense, which forbade him to say anything to Molly or do anything that would betray him to the others. There was nothing to do but wait.

For a man in love it was a lean diet, an ordeal reminiscent of that Spartan gentleman who went on smiling with the fox at his vitals. Because he must not give himself away, it was almost impossible to see Molly alone during the all too brief week-ends which seemed now to be over before they had really begun. The best he could do was to drop most casually the suggestion that it might not be a bad idea, for instance, to ask her to make a threesome at golf; or that as Mother was now a model, wasn't it indicated that she invite all the Prescotts over to dinner? One ought, after all, to be neighbourly.

Somewhat to his surprise, Tom was not at all annoyed at having Molly play golf with them; and the

interchange of dinners between the two families was performed most readily. But the satisfaction that Jack got out of it amounted only to a by-product, the feeble secondary satisfaction of seeing her through a fog of other people, and being able to wind up every sentence that he said aloud by an unspoken endearment in French. It was this dangerous pleasure of thinking in French that finally precipitated a climax.

The winter had dragged its weary length along, and leaden skies broke at last to let May come dancing in, palpitatingly alive, urgent to the point of danger.

They were on the golf course, and Molly, enchantingly feminine in a silk sweater and short skirt, had just played a second shot with a brassie. She was unconsciously holding the position, intent on the flight of the ball, — shoulder and hip forward, heel up, balance as certain as one of those Venetian masterpieces in blown glass which, more perfectly than any other form of human creation, expresses delicacy, rhythm and strength.

Jack was unable to take his eyes from her. Before he knew it he spoke his thought half aloud. *"Si tu savais comme tu es ravissante!"*

Fortunately Tom was scouring the rough for his drive. It was impossible for him to have heard.

But Molly heard. The remark, as such, was familiar. It had been breathed into her ear in Paris in a variety of accents, sometimes lightly, sometimes intensely, but always a prelude to passion. To hear it again now, uttered almost with anguish, made her start as though she had been touched. Her body took

on instant motion. She looked at Jack wide-eyed, questioning. "What did you say?" she gasped.

He could have got out of it with a joke and a grin, but, in a sort of panic, he swung round without a word and plunged into the rough to help Tom. Luckily, it took some time to find the ball, and he then made much ado of bending back bushes so that Tom might have a clear swing for the shot.

When, finally, they came out into the fairway, and all went on to the green, Jack stole an anxious glance at Molly's face. Whatever emotions she may have been experiencing, her face revealed nothing. It seemed to Jack that she was as calm and possessed as if he had never opened his mouth. Immediately he swung to the opposite extreme. From having almost prayed that she hadn't heard his muttered exclamation, he began to wish fervently that she had. It might knock things sky-high, but anything was better than this futile state of nullity. It was too much to ask that he should go on eternally choking it back, just because these crass conventions stuck up signboards all over the place, because a fool society demanded that a man devote his whole blasted life to pounds, shillings and pence.

He began to work himself up into a fine state of rage. Arid wastes of life stretched out in front of him. He saw himself in a dingy wooden shack, surrounded by natives, his hair turning grey and more grey, while he spanned torrents with bridges and laid endless railway lines across infinite deserts; and as the years dropped pitilessly behind, always his lips were shut, always there was some reason why he could not speak out, always he was like an hermetically sealed bottle,

until, at last, the internal pressure evaporated and there was nothing but emptiness inside . . .

A finger touched his arm. He looked round with a jerk.

Molly was walking shoulder to shoulder with him, an expression that was new in the eyes she turned to his.

"What makes you scowl so horribly?" she said. "Have I done something to annoy you?"

For a moment Jack's eyes blazed, his face suddenly white. It was his chance, and he knew it. All he had to do was to blurt it out, to drop the last barrier and let it come with a rush.

It is, however, a tremendous thing for a man to haul down his colors to a woman, to strip himself emotionally naked, to throw away every vestige of pride, of domination, and become nothing but a humble supplicant, a grovelling beggar. Like the spouting of a geyser, or the eruption of a volcano, the exact pressure must be reached first.

In spite of Jack's fine rage of a moment ago, the call found him unable to respond. Within himself, the way was not yet wholly cleared. He lacked that definitive maturity of purpose, that essential ruthlessness of ego which brushes away obstacles, physical or psychological, as the wind sweeps away clouds. He was tethered by his own youth, clutched and held back by a diversity of desires among which the desire for Molly was snarled and tangled. At the moment there was no tearing his way through.

His eyes dropped from hers. "I . . . I can't tell you," he said. "I want to most frightfully, but it's impossible now!"

They walked along for several paces before either of them found what to say.

Then Molly glanced again at his set face. "Will it be long before it is possible?"

Jack was staring straight in front of him. "God knows I hope not!" he said.

There was another pause. Then Molly gave an odd laugh. She half-shrugged and turned to cross to the other side of the fairway where her ball was lying. It was over her shoulder that she said, almost casually, "Perhaps my . . . curiosity . . . won't last forever!"

The underlining of the word "curiosity" caught Jack on the raw. He was already hating himself specifically and life generally. To be taunted by Molly, then, was more than he could stand. Something snapped in him. He could have beaten her over the head. With hard eyes, he called back, "You can keep your curiosity to yourself! I don't care!" He flung away, dived through a belt of rough on to the next fairway, and headed for the clubhouse. They could finish the damned game alone!

Pipe in teeth, Tom came strolling up. From his brother's retreating figure his surprised glance went to Molly. "What on earth's the trouble with Jack?" he asked.

Molly bent down to address the ball. She didn't want Tom to see what was in her eyes. But even to herself her voice didn't sound very firm or convincing when she said, "I don't know! I can't imagine!"

Chapter Eight

MOLLY'S bedroom, whether by day or night, was very attractive. By day, the sun, when it shone, had free access through large windows on two sides and gave added color to the flowered cretonne that framed the windows, covered the chairs and was spread over the bed.

On one side she looked out over the tops of apple trees, whose gnarled and twisted trunks housed many families of birds. Beyond this orchard, fields sloped up to a deep spinney of pines, above which, in due season, the moon would come climbing to splash the sleeping world with silver. On the other side one's eye inevitably climbed the garden wall and played truant along the ribbon of road winding between swelling meadows, hedge-divided, until it lost itself in the trees that ran down the hill into town.

By night, when the blinds were drawn and the curtains pulled across the windows, the fireplace became the central point of the room. It was deep and wide, and the bed was so placed that when she had snapped off the lights, she could lie and watch the glow and the dancing shadows while her mind went roaming.

To-night the hands of the clock on the mantelpiece were at long after midnight, but Molly was not lying dreaming. She was standing in front of the fire in a black kimono splashed with scarlet, her hair done in two long braids that hung down in front almost to

her waist. One bare foot, stuck into a red leather mule, rested on the fender. But for the cigarette smouldering in an amber holder between the first and second fingers on her left hand, she might indeed have stood for a model of Guinevere, that heroine of Jack's blind childhood, — blind, at least, as far as Molly was concerned.

Half an hour ago she had come in from her bath; but, instead of going to bed, had started to do her nails and left them, picked up a book, turned its pages and put it down again, sat down in the armchair by the fire, only to get up a moment later and move about the room.

Even now, as she stood staring down into the fire, muscles relaxed, the red end of her cigarette betrayed the fact that she was still restless inside. It was not long before her foot dropped from the fender. She went across to the writing table, put a sheet of writing paper on the blotting pad and dipped a pen into the inkwell, a large Florentine receptacle of blue majolica. Swiftly she wrote "Sunday night" and under it, "Dear Jack." Then the pen stopped. For a while the cigarette glowed furiously. Then, in a burst, she added, "I was a perfect beast to you this afternoon. I used the word 'curiosity' intentionally. I wanted to make you angry so that . . ."

Again words refused to come. Presently she put her pen through the unfinished sentence and reread the other two. Then the pen scored out the other sentence. All that was left was, "I was a perfect beast to you this afternoon."

For a time Molly considered that. "It's true," she thought. "I was. I ought to have remembered that he

was utterly different from the men in Paris. I suppose I got mixed up because of his French. . . . But, in any case, I don't like that beginning. It's too . . . abject!" She took the paper and tore it in small pieces.

A second sheet was headed "Sunday night." This time she began "My dear Jack." The word "my" seemed to her to convey a shade of aloofness. Then, in keeping with the character of that "my", she continued, "I'm awfully sorry I hurt your feelings this afternoon. Please forgive me. I don't like to think of you hating me all through the week, so I'm sending this to Little James Street in the hope that you will drop me a line and tell me that you don't think I'm altogether as rotten as you probably do at this moment."

At this point she went back and began to read it to herself, half-aloud. The word "awfully" stopped her. She tried it again, leaving that word out. "My dear Jack, I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. . . . Yes, that's better." The offending word was cancelled and she read on to the end.

It was a perfectly good letter, as such, but . . . well, she wasn't so sure! She got up and returned to the fireplace, pried out the end of the cigarette from her holder, inserted another and lit it. After all, — she gave a little smile, — Jack was inclined to be pretty dogmatic! If she gave him half a chance like that, he'd probably read into it everything she had tried to keep out. That would be fatal. In fact the letter wasn't right at all! It was all wrong. The only possible treatment for a man like Jack was to slam the ball back again as hard as he had sent it. Of course! How obvious!

She went back to the desk, tore up the second letter and dashed off a third. "My dear Jack, I haven't the faintest idea why you behaved like a gamin this afternoon. I suggest that you pull yourself together and send me an apology. Otherwise, I don't think I shall feel like playing golf with you again. Yours sincerely, Molly."

"There!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "Now we'll see! I hope . . ."

Whatever her hope was, she left it unuttered; but when, a moment later, she went deliberately to the mirror on her dressing table and looked at herself, she saw what she knew she would see, a flush on both her cheeks.

Chapter Nine

It was not until three days later that Molly received the answer, — three days in which she held a mental review of Jack in all his phases.

In that household the morning mail was sorted before the family came down for breakfast and placed beside each person's plate. It was there that she found it when, a little late as usual, she entered the room to find her father already deep in the newspaper, and her mother, entrenched behind the coffeepot, tearing off the wrappers of garden catalogues.

"Good morning, Mother!" said Molly. "Morning, Dad!" She kissed them both and went round to her place.

Mr. Prescott showed the top half of his face above the paper. "Want me at the usual time this morning?"

Molly smiled. "Is that a gentle hint that you're fed up and want a day off?"

Her father moved restlessly. Secretly very much flattered that Molly was doing his portrait, he had pretended to grumble and fuss, to make out that he was doing her a great favor to sit, — good-humored byplay between father and daughter.

Molly knew it, but was perfectly willing to play up to it; hence her suggestion of a day off, which was, she knew, the last thing he wanted.

"Fed up, yes!" said Mr. Prescott. "But as to taking a day off, it's out of the question. It would be en-

couraging you to slack. No, my dear! You started this thing. You've got to go through with it, even though I'm the unfortunate victim. Incidentally, if you can make me half as beautiful as you made Mrs. Ingleside, I suppose I should consider my sufferings somewhat mitigated!"

At that moment Molly saw the letter. The last half of her father's remarks didn't register. Jack's handwriting was sending wireless messages to all parts of her.

"Here's your coffee, dear!"

Her mother's voice penetrated slowly. By the time she looked up, the coffee was being held out at arm's length. "Sorry!" said Molly, and she took it so quickly that coffee slopped over into the saucer.

"What is the matter?" said Mrs. Prescott. "You're all thumbs this morning! . . . And you've spilled it on to your letter too. I do hope it's not on the tablecloth!"

Molly bit her lip. Damn! Why had she been unlucky enough to start all this interruption? If only they had brought Jack up to her room! She took the letter with tingling fingers, wiped it with her napkin and put it out of sight in her lap.

"It's all right, Mother," she said. "There's not a drop on the cloth. . . . What is there to eat this morning? Fish cakes and bacon and eggs, eh? Oh, well, I'll try the fish."

The letter in her lap felt like a leaden weight. Could she keep it there through this eternal meal, or would it be better to read it now and pretend that it was only a casual invitation to golf next Saturday?

No, it wouldn't be possible. Just suppose he had written that he . . .

She could feel herself beginning to flush. While her knife scraped cracklingly over toast in the process of buttering it, she turned quickly to her father as a reinforcement. "What's the news, Dad? Couldn't you favour us with a few bright running comments as you devour that paper, or is it all so dull that you prefer to spare us?"

Mr. Prescott lowered the paper on to the table and produced pipe and tobacco. "Actually speaking," he said, "there isn't any news; but to anybody of intelligence, who knows how to read between the lines, there is always something to be gleaned on the political situation. The mere statement that Sir Edward Grey is spending the week-end at Chequers, for example, may seem insignificant, but if one happens to notice that Asquith is there too, the inference is that they are not merely indulging in a little golf and bridge, but that some action is about to be taken in the matter of the Balkans, or that the Kaiser's growing pains have caused a new flutter in the Downing Street dovecote."

His spatulate forefinger was administering that final gauging pressure on the tobacco without which no pipe ever draws well. He struck a match and went on talking between puffs, so that the flame spurted up and down irregularly. "At the moment . . . pff . . . it is without question that governmental nerves are at high tension . . . pff, pff . . . in every country in Europe, and the leader writers reflect it . . . pff, pff . . . by uttering Chesterfieldian advice to all the other governments."

Molly congratulated herself. If she could only keep this going, she could make a pretence of bolting her fish and get out in another few minutes. "But why the excitement, Dad?"

"Ego, my dear," said Mr. Prescott. "Inflated ego, a disease from which every nation has always suffered. Rome became top-heavy with it and fell. Greece was blinded by it. In our own day the most outstanding examples are this country, I regret to say, and Germany. Germany is *'uber alles,'* and we 'rule the waves.' Sooner or later both those bubbles will be pricked, and, like Greece and Rome, we shall make our little bow and pass into the pages of the history books. For all we know, this week-end at Chequers may mark another milestone along the inevitable road!"

"Pass your cup, dear," said Mrs. Prescott, her eye on Molly, "and I'll give you some more coffee."

From sheer, unconscious habit Mr. Prescott picked up his cup and held it out.

Mrs. Prescott smiled. "No, you can't have any more, John. You've had three already. I was talking to Molly."

"Why, of course," said Mr. Prescott. "I don't want any more at all. I wasn't thinking." He put down his cup again, with an unconfessed touch of regret, and crossed one leg over the other in preparation for holding forth once more.

But Molly cut in quickly. "No thanks, Mother," she said. "I don't want any more." She rose and dropped her napkin on the table. "I'll expect you in the studio in twenty minutes, Dad."

Mrs. Prescott looked anxious. "But, my dear, you haven't eaten a thing!"

Molly smiled. "Not hungry this morning. I'll probably make up for it at lunch."

"Are you sure you're all right?" asked Mrs. Prescott.

"Heavens, yes!" said Molly, halfway to the door.

"Well, it isn't like you to go rushing off like this," insisted Mrs. Prescott. "And you've forgotten all about your letter too!"

Molly had a hand on the door handle. She held up the other to her Mother, the letter rolled tightly in it. "No, I've got it," she said. "It's . . . it's just a note from Jack. Twenty minutes, Dad!"

Before her father had time to say "Very well!" she was outside and had the door shut. In another moment she had left the house and was crossing the garden at a run. Her mother might have followed her up to the bedroom, but in the studio she was safe, — for twenty minutes!

On an easel was the unfinished canvas of her father. Against the end wall, facing the door, was the portrait of Mrs. Ingleside, about which both Tom and Jack had indulged in superlatives. Molly stood in the middle of the floor and ripped open her letter.

The strong light from the sloping roof revealed a more charming picture than anything she herself had painted, — a young girl, alight with expectation and excitement, lips parted, eagerness in every line of her.

As she read, the envelope slipped from her fingers and floated to the floor a yard away. By the time she reached the signature her eyes were full of bewilderment and hurt.

She took a deep breath and moved forward to the

table where brushes and colors and palette and paint rags and cigarettes were all in readiness for the morning's work, — familiar things that acted like a magnet, whose touch was comforting, steadying. For a time her hand played with them unconsciously.

"He doesn't care!" she muttered. "And I thought he . . . It can't be!"

She raised the letter, and every word hurt.

"DEAR MOLLY,

I certainly do apologise. I was frightfully rude and I could have bitten my tongue out for saying it. Please forgive me. The only excuse I can offer for being such an abysmal ass is that I had a frightful headache that day and it made me jumpy.

"I'd give the world to have it unsaid.

Yours,
"JACK."

At the end of this second reading, Molly's eyes were hard, her nostrils wide. She gave a sneering laugh and began to tear the letter into smaller and smaller pieces. "You fool!" she said to herself; and then, "Oh, damn! Damn everything! . . . I don't care either!"

The pieces fluttered to the ground like tiny snowflakes.

The crunch of feet sounded outside, and then the door opened and Mr. Prescott came in. "Well," he said, "here I am . . . and I observe that you haven't even got your overalls on yet! That means making me sit for an extra five minutes, I suppose!"

At his entrance Molly turned quickly so that her back was towards him. She reached out a shaky hand and picked up a packet of cigarettes. She lit one de-

liberately. Then she said, "There isn't going to be any sitting to-day."

Mr. Prescott's eyebrows went up. He took the pipe out of his mouth and stood looking at the back of her head. "No sitting? Why on earth not?"

Molly swallowed, holding on to herself with clenched fists. "I don't happen to feel like work, that's all."

"But my dear child . . ."

She swung round on him, took him by the elbow and led him to the door. "You run away and amuse yourself!" she said. "I'll see you at lunch time. Good-bye." She kissed him and pushed him outside.

Mr. Prescott gasped as he heard the sound of the key in the lock. "Well, I'm damned!" he muttered. And then, after a pause, tugging his moustache thoughtfully, "I think she would rather not have her mother come out just at the moment. H'm! I will proceed to lose myself till lunch time!"

Chapter Ten

WHEN Jack got back from his office on the day that he sent his answer to Molly, he found Tom already there, his legs dangling over the side of the arm-chair, an evening paper on his lap.

"Hullo!" said Tom, without looking up.

It was a purely unconscious habit that they had developed, of greeting one another when they met at the end of the day's work. The greeting was never more than "hullo!" but, like the wave of a hand between friends at a distance, it signified a mutual background of fellow feeling, a verification of the fact that the current was still turned on.

"Hullo!" grunted Jack. He took off his straw hat and gave it a flip aiming at the sofa. The arc was too high. It struck the piano and thudded to the floor. "What's on for to-night?" he asked.

"Work!" said Tom.

Jack gave a laugh. "Like hell it is! I've done all the work I'm going to do for quite a while."

Tom stared across. "You're talking blither, my lad!"

"Think so? . . . If you'd chuck away that blasted paper and flatter me with your attention you might come to a different conclusion."

Without pause, Tom gave the paper a push. It slid to the carpet. "I'm all ears," he said quietly. "Proceed."

If Jack had begun at the beginning, Tom would have had a picture of him sitting at his desk, staring unseeing at blue prints, framing burning sentences to write to Molly, pouring out on paper all the lovely things that died of strangulation when he was face to face with her, when he was face to face with the fact of being twenty-six and, comparatively speaking, still an office boy.

But Jack didn't begin there. He began quite a while later, after that letter had been reduced almost to its original pulp, after the urge that dictated it had spent itself like a dropped wind. He perched on the edge of the table and said, "For certain reasons that are immaterial, I faced myself up to-day with the facts of my so-called career and came to the conclusion that I was finished with licking stamps. I sent my name in to the chief and asked if he would see me. He saw me. I asked him point-blank about China. Equally point-blank he said that China was off, finally and forever."

"Oh, lord!" said Tom.

Jack didn't seem to hear. He went straight on. "I asked him if there were any other real jobs, foreign jobs, going. He said there were not. The firm, at the moment, is not accepting any foreign contracts because, he said, of the extreme delicacy of the European situation, — whatever that may mean. He didn't favor me with any details. So . . ." Jack's hand went into his pocket and clenched Molly's letter . . . "I came out of that same door which I went in, definitely confirmed in my rank of office boy! It goes without saying that the China job would have meant a big raise in salary and a jump of a couple of rungs up

the ladder. To-night I know that my present princely salary, which just about keeps me in tobacco, will not be advanced; and, furthermore, instead of going up any rungs, there isn't even any ladder in sight. . . . Now you know why I'll see everybody in flames before I do any work to-night!"

As he came to an end, his brother's scowl was as black as his own.

"Gosh!" said Tom. "That's rough luck, old man! I'm damned sorry!"

Jack made no answer. He was thinking of the futile lie that he had written to Molly, — of the headache that had made him jumpy. Headache . . . ! He laughed bitterly. "It's just about put the lid on everything!" he said.

Tom nodded. If only he could do something!

"Know what I think?" said Jack.

"No. What?"

"I think I'd better chuck this firm — they're a lot of stick-in-the-muds anyway — and go out to China on my own and see if I can't get in from that end."

Tom got up from the armchair and began to walk up and down. "I don't know," he said. "At first glance it might be good. . . . Let's go over it a bit." He was silent for a moment. Then he cocked an eye at Jack. "In the first place, must you go to China? I mean, isn't there really anything doing here?"

Jack shook his head. "Nothing but routine stuff that doesn't lead anywhere. The only chance for a beginner is to get out."

Tom considered. Then he said, "All right. Let's grant that. But if you go to China, won't you find the

whole country controlled from this end? Don't the firms here have the giving out of all the plums?"

Jack passed a hand over his face, moved uncomfortably. "Don't know!" he said. "Hadn't thought of it from that angle. It may be so. But, after all, isn't there some virtue in being Johnny-on-the-spot? There must be hundreds of fellows who have worked their way in from that end!"

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly!" he said. "But there must also be hundreds of fellows who have starved while attempting to do so. . . . Don't think I'm trying to put a crimp in your going! I'd walk out now and buy your ticket if it'd do any good! But it's vastly important and we've got to look at the thing with brains instead of just jumping into it."

Jack scowled. "I know," he said. "That's why I didn't resign then and there, much as I was tempted to do so! . . . But, great Scott! A man can't just sit down and rot to death on an office stool!"

Tom waved a deprecating hand. "But my dear chap, it's a platitude that there's more rotting to death done off an office stool than on one! For that matter, I'm not much better off than you are, as far as position in the office is concerned, but I tell you that one fine day I'm going to be senior partner!"

"That goes without saying," said Jack. "But it's because the law courts are here. If they were in Johannesburg, would you stay in London? I might just as well get a job thumping a piano in a movie as try and be an engineer here! Incidentally, now that that particular job is off, China becomes merely a figure of speech. It merely implies some place, any

place, on the face of the globe where there is engineering to be done."

"I see," said Tom. "But, damn it, that brings us back to our first query — whether the worth-while things are not handled here?"

"I refuse to believe it," said Jack. "It may be true of any non-British country, but I can rattle off the names of half a dozen firms in Canada, Australia and the Cape, and they are not branches of London firms, either!"

"You can?" Tom stopped pacing and took up a position with his back to the fireplace, looking down at his brother. "That changes the equation entirely. I begin to see daylight."

"Well," said Jack, "what is it?"

"It may not seem very bright," said Tom, "but it's what I'd do if I were in your shoes. It seems to me it's no earthly use leaping out into the blue. The competition's too great. Therefore what I'd do is to make an intensive study of the kind of development each one of those countries is going through, — the Museum will have all the literature, — pick out the most promising one, and then write a letter to every single firm out there, asking if they have an opening for a man of guts and ability!" He paused, smiled and added, "The letter itself is evidence of the former quality, and you have actual proof of the latter in your various diplomas from the Royal College of Engineering!"

Jack nodded thoughtfully. "All of which," he said, "will take a hell of a long time! And I'm itching for action!" He shrugged his shoulders. "However, it's as sound as a bell, and I'll do it. Meanwhile, I suppose

I'd better hang on to the present billet. It does help to pay expenses at least!"

"More than that," said Tom, "it's a good talking point in your letters to say that you are actually a member of the firm of Johnston, Seldon and Stone. Their name counts. . . . And now, what about barging along to the Rendezvous? I could eat a horse. We can discuss details just as well over a sole meunière and a bottle of Beaune as we can here. Better! . . . One other thing! If you feel like wandering round to the Museum after dinner, I'll come along. Those catalogues are pretty bewildering till you get started."

"Thought you brought home a brief case full of stuff?" said Jack.

Tom was reaching for his hat and stick. "Oh, that's all right," he said. "I haven't had an evening in the Museum for ages. All I needed was a good excuse. Come on!"

Jack dragged himself to his feet. In spite of himself, he felt a little more hopeful. It was good to have a definite objective again. He was a fool to have wasted all this time merely to have the office say no. He ought to have gone into the chief months ago, or else have asked Tom about it. It was always worth asking Tom. . . . If only he could ask him about Molly, get that off his chest! After all, Tom liked her, thought she had brains. It wasn't as if she were some giggling little fool. And even if he had nothing more to suggest than that it was wise to wait, which was obvious, it would help most frightfully to be able to talk about it, to have him as an ally instead of having to dodge and cover up every time she was

mentioned. It was all this lying business that was so hellish. . . .

He went over and picked up his hat, stared unseeing at the name in it, and, at last, as though to get rid of it, put it on his head. "Look here, old man," he said, "I'd like to . . ."

His eyes met Tom's. It was a fatal mistake. If he hadn't looked at him, he might have been able to tell him. The ocular contact was too unnerving. He stopped dead.

Tom stood at the door, waiting. "Well?" he said.

It was no good. The self-conscious check had killed the inspiration. It was impossible to tell him now. Jack floundered. "I . . . I was merely going to say that it's absurd for you to waste an evening at the Museum. I can hunt . . ."

"Oh, rats!" Tom's voice was gruff. "You don't suppose I'd be fool enough to come if it didn't amuse me?" He opened the door and began to stump noisily down.

Jack stood for a moment, frowning. Then his hand went out for his stick and he followed his brother.

And so the chance was lost.

Chapter Eleven

To all the millions of young men occupied with earning their livings, the mere assassination of an archduke was of the same relative unimportance as the birth of a son to the Emperor of Japan. Those funny little countries down there were crawling with archdukes, whatever they were. One more or less didn't matter. And so, on arriving at their offices, they dropped the paper with its flaring headlines into the waste basket and, with nods of greeting to their fellow toilers, got down to the day's work, which was a little heavier than usual because it was the holiday season and the absence of the various lucky devils who were basking at the seaside, or putting in their fortnight in a houseboat on the river, left them short-handed.

The declaration of war between Austria and Serbia was at first in the nature of a joke. "Those Balkans at it again! Why, damn it, it was only the other day that the Greeks had a dust-up with the Bulgars or somebody. What a crowd they are! . . . Oh, well, who cares? I shall be in Cornwall next week!"

But "next week" Germany declared war on Russia and France. . . . "Well, I'll be damned! What on earth is all this about, anyway? The jolly old Kaiser suffering from hydrophobia, I suppose: this heat too much for him! Lord, I bet the Froggies'll get it in the neck! Those Germans are pretty hefty lads, so

I've been told. Thank God for the British navy! They'll keep our end up, all right. I suppose we'll have to lend 'em a Dreadnaught or two if this Entente Cordiale stuff is anything more than political hot air."

From that moment, however, the miasma spread and came in rolling waves across the Channel. It affected the average young man. The office stool no longer fitted. It had become prickly. He dashed out at the noon hour to buy "extras." "This thing's coming pretty close. What does Old Grey mean by saying that we have a debt of honor to France and Belgium? Thought we'd been 'hereditary enemies' for centuries! . . . All the same, he may be right. Look what those blighters are doing in Belgium! Women and children! . . . God!"

And so, even with the labor pains of propaganda, Great Britain contracted a high moral form of that hydrophobia of which they had scornfully accused the Kaiser a few days previously. Strange academic words were on everybody's unaccustomed lip — honor, loyalty, vindication, principle — and the first recruit, before even the queues had formed to take the shilling, was Almighty God, tricked out in uniform by politicians and churchmen who took the words out of each other's mouths. The first hundred thousand went across the Channel. If there were still any faint lingering doubts, the smell of British blood was all that was necessary. The nation dedicated itself to war.

Chapter Twelve

FROM the end of May to the beginning of that August was a brief enough span.

To Mrs. Ingleside it marked only the blooming of her roses and the comings and goings of her two sons during those long, beautiful, summer days. The world outside was, as usual, a distant murmur.

To Molly, whose work had gone stale, and whose nerves seemed to be somewhat on edge for no reason at all, unless it was the heat, or her father's unusual insistence on those old politics of his, those two months were almost interminable. As soon as Paris came to life after the summer closing she was going back there, she decided. She needed a sight of Monsieur Merthault's wagging beard, the stiffening effect of his blistering sarcasms, in order to get tuned up again. Art demanded more stimulus than golf, especially when one was a mere target for somebody else's ego.

Before the end of May, Jack had become engaged in correspondence with a South African firm. The opening was a good one and, at long last — the mail service to South Africa and back would turn any impatient man's hair grey — arrangements were completed for him to go out. All that was lacking was the final cable to confirm the date of his sailing. On advice from them, he had bought an outfit of clothes suited to the climate, and a long tin box in which to

carry them. With no little triumph he had handed in his resignation to Johnston, Seldon and Stick-in-the-mud. Acting under advice of counsel, Tom, he had refrained from telling his mother anything more than China was definitely off, but that there was a possibility of an opening in Johannesburg, which might or might not come to anything. How prophetic that was, neither of them knew. The cable had not yet come when Serbia, sure of the support of a few hundred million Russians, began to thumb its nose at Austria.

"And that," said Tom, "is the delicacy of the European situation referred to by your boss!"

"By Jove," said Jack, "do you realise that Jean and Marcel and perhaps even Monsieur de Rohan will get let in for this? That conscription business will get them all, — except jolly old Meuvret. He's too old. Pretty good thing we weren't born French . . . Do you think there's any chance of its holding up my cable?"

Tom didn't reply immediately. It was impossible to see anything clearly in all the confusion. Every hour brought a new move on the international chess board. There was a chance that Serbia might climb down, a chance that Jack might get his boat. Why punish him with pessimism at the eleventh hour? "It's awfully hard to say," he said. "Of course it might come to-day, or to-morrow . . ."

But Jack caught him up. "You mean," he said, "that if it doesn't, it's never coming?"

Tom dodged the direct question. "Have you forgotten that German Rhodes scholar at Oxford who drank to *'der tag'?* It looks to me as if this is it!"

"That may be so, but, man alive, what's that got

to do with you and me? If they want a war, let 'em have one. I don't see why it should interfere with us. Father didn't have to bother about the Boer War. He stayed on the job!"

"I hope we can stay on ours!" said Tom. "But this isn't going to be a picnic like the Boer War. However, don't listen to my croakings. I don't know any more about it than you do. All I hope is that you'll be on the high seas before hell's let loose!"

It was only two nights later, however, that the patriotic emotions of what Tom called the most civilised capital in the world were titillated to the point of public utterance. No gladiatorial audience yelling with inverted thumbs, no dancing escort of a tumbril to the guillotine, demanded blood more barbarically than the howling mobs that surged through the streets of London, their features distorted, their eyes blazing with maniacal frenzy. The innate sadism of mankind, without which, perhaps, the instinct of self-preservation would long since have become atrophied, was stripped of the veneer with which law and religion have lightly painted it. Man, the killer, had loosed himself once more.

The sound of the distant tumult, hoarse and ominous, shook the windows of the house in Little James Street. Between the two brothers lay an evening paper with the one word WAR in huge letters right across the front page.

For a long time both had been silent, unconsciously under the spell of that group voice whose tone did strange things to the pulses.

At last Tom gave a little shiver, got up and began to walk up and down.

"Well, old man," he said, "I'm afraid there's no further argument. It's up to us now!"

Jack gave a hard laugh. "A sweet piece of lunacy! These damned politicians bungle their job, and the result is that you and I and all of us have got to chuck everything we've worked for and go out and clean up their blasted mess!"

Tom nodded. "The only consolation is that everybody's going to be in it, — by which I mean that there won't be any law or engineering while this war lasts. I was talking to my chief yesterday and he said that every man in England will have to get into uniform. He's a pal of Winston's, so presumably he knows something."

Jack rammed his hands into his pockets. "Oh, well, we've chewed the rag about it for three days. There are no further oaths I can invent. What's the next step? Do we line up at a recruiting office and call it a day?" He laughed. "Lord knows I've been howling for action for some while!"

Tom shook his head. "No," he said. "I don't think there's any use in that. I don't know much about the army, but it's common sense that they're going to need a lot more officers than they've got."

"Officers?" echoed Jack. "How the devil could we be officers? We don't even know any drill, — except the stuff we learned in Frankfurt."

A gleam of amusement came into Tom's eyes. "Under the circumstances, it might be rather priceless to teach 'em German drill! . . . No, but seriously, they're going to have to train officers as well as men, and, after all, it's a waste of education to have to take orders from a lot of illiterate sergeants.

They're going to need people who can take responsibility. Besides, we both know French and German, and that might be jolly useful."

"All right," said Jack, "but how does one become an officer?"

"Ask me another!" said Tom. "I shall have to see my chief again."

Jack laughed. "You and your chief are a great team! The war will be over before you can work that."

"You're always in such a confounded hurry!" said Tom. "Let's give it a week, at least."

"A week? . . . Well, perhaps I can last as long as that. But don't forget that I've been waiting for various things to happen for just about as long as I can stick!" Jack got up and went to knock out his pipe against the fireplace. He went on talking as he did so. "This particular thing is within my control, and if you and your chief can't make us officers within seven days, I'm for the recruiting office. Are you game?"

"Fair enough!" said Tom. "Officers or privates, we may as well see it through together. Meanwhile, how about going home to-morrow after I've put it up to the chief, and breaking it to Mother? I think we'd better."

At the mention of the word "home," Jack's expression changed. It was as though for a time one aspect of a problem had left his mind, and this word brought it back again. . . . To see Molly now would be asking for trouble. Besides, what was the good, anyhow? She was fed to the teeth with all his stuff about South Africa, and no wonder. He'd only have

this soldiering business to hide behind now, and that was asking too much. "I think it's your turn to spring this on Mother," he said. "I've given her enough to worry about already. If you don't very much mind, I'd rather you went down by yourself this time. I'll go down later when she's more used to the idea."

On the floor between them was still lying that word WAR. Tom stared down at it with puckered brows. For him too the mention of home had started new trains of thought. For several moments he made no answer. Finally he turned away to the window and said slowly, "All right. I'll go down alone."

Chapter Thirteen

It seemed to Jack next morning that not only the physical appearance of London had changed, but that the very feel of it was different.

There were crowds outside Buckingham Palace, more crowds outside the railings of the Guards' Barracks. Nobody strolled any more. Everybody was hurrying. Hoardings were being plastered with huge bills, exhorting all young men to join the army and the navy. At intervals hoarse-voiced men and boys came running with extra editions, yelling the news of Germany's terrifyingly quick advance into Belgium. And with each edition the electric tension seemed to grow tighter. Strangers spoke to one another, and drifted apart again, nervous, excited, bewildered, as if they did not know what to do.

Before he had been walking an hour, Jack caught it, — that physical sensation which at Oxford they had called "the needle," an alarm that made the palms of the hands sweat coldly and the pit of the stomach curl up; a sensation soon to be generally known as "wind up." He expected it to leave him after a time, as it always did the moment the pistol went to start a race or the gong rang for the first round.

This morning there was neither pistol nor gong, and the oppressive apprehension clung to him like a burr as he tried to puzzle his way through, to achieve

some mental readjustment. If it were a matter of saying yes or no, how simple life would be! But it was being borne in upon him that no problem ever came clear cut, a complete unit. Its fringes overlapped and interwove with the fringes of something else, equally important, equally enmeshed. The best one could do, apparently, was an unsatisfactory series of half-answers, compromises; the solution of one question being dependent upon the future solution of another.

Even now, after three days of argument with Tom, when he had succeeded in making himself renounce South Africa, had agreed, however reluctantly, that the only thing to do was to fight, his mind was no more at ease than it had been before. Where he had been between the Scylla of his career and the Charybdis of Molly, it seemed now that the Etna of war was an added confusion. Why was it that he didn't seem to be able to accomplish anything, that every time he took a step forward a thousand stumbling blocks appeared in the road to prevent his taking another step? Was it bad luck or bad judgment? Was he born to be a failure or was this some sort of stoic training to which he must submit before he would be any good? If so, why? Tom wasn't like that. Tom was just as definite as it was possible to be. He mapped out a course and stuck to it. Even the war hadn't put him off his stride. He was going to use it, wring something out of it, which would make him a better lawyer when he got back. He was so certain of himself that he laid it down as an axiom that he would make as good an officer as any man who had ever been through Sandhurst. The chances were that he

would too. Tom never seemed to get bogged as he did. If Tom had been in his shoes he would have been in South Africa long ago. And Molly? What would he have done if he had fallen in love with Molly? . . . Jack shied away from the thought.

He spent the rest of the day mentally and physically at a loose end, at one moment wishing that he had gone home with Tom, the next thanking God that he hadn't. During the afternoon he dropped in, on the spur of the moment, to a movie where there was an orchestra of fifty or sixty pieces. For a time he was held by the fact that each man played his instrument well; but presently his stomach turned at the inanity of the music they played, and, in the middle of the feature picture, he got up and walked out. . . . Damn it, why had he promised to wait a week? It would have been better to go round to a recruiting office and get the thing over. They might be in the middle of it in France in a few days, and that would have helped. At least, he would have had the satisfaction of doing something, of pulling his weight, instead of just hanging around, not the slightest use to himself or anybody else.

He was still chewing an unsatisfactory cud of half-thought when he made his way back along Little James Street that evening. One glance at the lightless windows told him that Tom was not there yet. He glanced at his watch. Unless Tom came in an hour, he couldn't be back until to-morrow morning. There was only the one late train. Oh, well, what did it matter? He'd go to bed and forget it!

So Jack clumped up the stairs and went into the apartment, switched on all the lights and then poured

himself a whisky and soda. Queer how empty it felt without Tom there! . . . He sat down at the piano and played a series of chords. Would they keep this place on when they went out to France or would Tom decide that they should give it up and put the furniture into storage? He had probably thought it all out in the train on the way down. He wouldn't have missed a point of that sort. . . . They might never see these rooms again. Somebody else would have taken them by the time they got back. Oh, well, it didn't matter. They'd have to begin all over again, anyway, and, after all, it had been pretty damned miserable here this last year. Might have better luck in a new place!

He found that without any conscious direction he was playing "Les Cloches de Nantes." The room was full of the Abbé de Rohan's baritone. He followed the voice with his accompaniment and all through the song he saw Tom leaning on his billiard cue and himself standing rapt by the harmonium. How far they had come since then! It was like another life, like looking at a picture of two kids he had once known. Where would they both be when they could look back on Little James Street and see that as another life? Please God, Molly would be in it then . . . Molly. . . . He would have to say good-bye to her in a week or so, and all he would be able to do would be to shake her casually by the hand and say, "Cheerio! See you soon", and then go off and try and make a decent soldier. Would she care? . . . There was nothing but that one moment on the golf course when her voice and her eyes had been awfully gentle. And then, in the next breath, she had sneered at him!

Why the devil should she care? The only hope was that, being a woman, she might have seen through his efforts to avoid her, might have interpreted them correctly. . . . Conceited ass! Why imagine that she would do that? Molly wouldn't waste her time trying to interpret his oafish actions, or any other man's! She wasn't that sort. There was nothing sloppy about Molly. She looked at you with straight, unshadowed eyes, without any question mark behind them. That was one of the things that made her Molly. . . . When they'd won the war and everything was rosy, he'd get a real job inevitably, and then. . . .

The opening of the room door brought him to earth again.

"Hullo!" said Tom.

Jack broke off in the middle of a chord and got up. "Hullo! I didn't expect you till midnight."

"That's exactly what it is!" said Tom. He laughed, a little boisterously, dropped his hat and a pile of evening papers on the table, and put his stick in the corner. "Give me a drink, for the love of heaven!"

Jack blinked. "Lord, I didn't think I'd been playing as long as that. What'll you have? Whisky and soda? If so, help yourself!" He nodded in the direction of the table where stood the bottle, a siphon and a glass.

"Oh, right!" said Tom. "I didn't see 'em."

Jack watched him as he poured the drink. "Well," he said, "what's the news? You look pretty pleased with yourself, so I presume things are all right." He strolled across to the open window and stood with his back to it, facing into the room.

Tom chuckled and raised his glass. There was a gleam in his eyes. "Here's to all our brother officers in the Royal Artillery!"

Jack's heart gave a kick of excitement. He had a vague picture of guns, smoke, terrific noise. "D' you mean to say you've worked it?"

Tom laughed and drank. "You can work anything, once you put your mind on it!" he said. He put his glass down and reached for a cigarette.

Jack winced. That was exactly the thing that he had been unable to do. "Oh, rats!" he said. "Keep your copybook stuff for some other time! What's happened?"

"Well," said Tom, "to come to the point, a little hurriedly, I put it to my chief this morning. He entirely agreed that men of brain like you and me would be hiding our lights under a bushel if we became humble privates! More than that, my lad, he picked up the telephone then and there, talked to some general or other at the War Office and gave him our names and qualifications. It took about two minutes, and then he hung up and said to me, 'In a matter of days you'll both be second lieutenants in the artillery. Will that do?' I told him that it would do very well indeed, thank you! Then he made one or two complimentary remarks about my work which I will spare you, and wound by saying that when I came back again he'd have a place for me in the office at a somewhat better salary! . . . What do you know about that?" He hooked a thumb in the armhole of his waistcoat and leaned back against the mantelpiece with complete satisfaction.

"Great work!" said Jack. "Perfectly splendid! As

the old Dean used to say, your chief is 'evidently a man of bowels.' I take back any sarcastic remarks I may have made yesterday. I hope he'll become Lord Chief Justice, or whatever it is barristers become when they reach the top of the tree."

Tom laughed. "I thought you'd agree that it was pretty sporting of him to leap right on to it like that!"

"What happens next, then?" asked Jack. "Do we simply sit tight till the War Office communicates?"

"More or less," said Tom. "As I've never even seen a big gun, and I know you haven't either, I think it's indicated that we read up on the artillery. We might just as well get an idea of what we're in for before we get a wire ordering us to report somewhere."

Jack gave a queer laugh. "Gosh!" he said. "This is an extraordinary mix-up! Who would ever have dreamed that we should be officers in the army? It's as fantastic as the Arabian Nights. . . . Incidentally, how did Mother take it?"

Tom shook his head. "She was badly knocked, I'm afraid. You know what a sportsman she is, though! She didn't cry or anything."

Jack nodded. "I know!"

"She agreed finally that it was the only thing to do, so it wasn't as desperately awful as I was afraid it was going to be."

Jack nodded again. This was another of these overlappings. You went through your own private little Gehenna and gave up every plan you had ever made in order to go out and do the right thing, and then you found that for somebody else it was absolutely the wrong thing! Mother seemed to have spent her life

shutting up and sticking it out. It was so easy now to see how she must have hated Father's going off all the time, and their own departures too, even though it wasn't any farther than France and Germany, and she'd never said a word! Perhaps that training would help her now. . . .

A quick nervous laugh from Tom broke into Jack's thoughts. He looked across and saw Tom touch his tie uncomfortably. Then he began to speak, and his voice was pitched in a different key.

"By the way," he said, "there's another item on my news list that may not be entirely without interest to you. . . . I saw Molly to-day!"

Jack's eyes dropped from his brother's face. He grunted a reluctant, "Oh, yes?" and half turned towards the window.

"Yes," said Tom. "I . . . that is . . . Oh, well, hell! . . . I won't bore you with the details, but the essential point of the whole thing is that she said she'd marry me. Not now, of course! That would be perfectly absurd! But just as soon as the war's over. . . ."

He laughed again, this time in pure excitement; emptied his glass at a gulp and put it down on the table with a slam. "That's my real news!" he said. "What do you think of it? Isn't it pretty tremendous? I've hardly been able to tell whether I'm on my head or my heels since it happened! I can scarcely believe it now! It's . . . it's simply too marvellous! . . . Why don't you say something? Incidentally, here's a vastly important question. Do you think you'll be able to stand her as a sister-in-law? I'm not asking out of curiosity. You and she don't seem to have hit it off

so well together up to now, but I hope to goodness you won't hate the sight of her when we get married! You'd find she's a corker, really, old man, if you could only see her the right way! She's . . ."

Jack barely heard him as far as that. What else Tom said he never knew. Strange things were happening inside him, inner veils lifting that revealed glimpses of himself that were frightening, — frustration was choking him, the concentrated direction of his desires being denied their objective, the preparatory tendrils lopped off and left bleeding; then surges of hatred and revolt, — hatred against Molly, the woman who was, however unconsciously, responsible; hatred against Tom, no longer a brother but simply the male who had wielded the axe, the robber who had carried off his woman, affronted his pride, thwarted his deepest instinct. . . .

None of these things was defined or even expressed in words. It was more like a seizure that gave momentary birth to dim perceptions of awful possibilities of wrenching and killing in a struggle against the truth.

He came out of it shaking, his body wet with sweat, his hands clutching the window sill so that the knuckles were four white lumps on the back of each. Then the room slid slowly into focus and Tom was his brother again, and things would have to go on . . . things . . . senseless things, meaningless. . . . He turned stiffly.

There was something he had to say, something that Tom was waiting for him to say. What was it? Oh, yes. . . . He could feel his mouth open, and then he heard his own voice. "You've got all the luck. I

. . . I congratulate you. It's . . . perfectly splendid."

Then some remnant of brain sent an order down to his legs. He moved across the room, opened the bedroom door, muttered over his shoulder, "Be back in a moment. Just want to get something."

He closed the door behind him and stood very still in the merciful darkness.

PART THREE

Chapter One

THE distance between London and the front line at, say, Cambrai can be measured, at need, in hours. When, however, an artillery unit makes that anabasis by way of Egypt, Greece and Serbia, it can take anywhere from one to two years, — time enough for the personnel of that unit to have been toughened or decimated by dysentery, malaria, sand colic, frozen extremities and, most unpleasant of all, Bulgarian shell fire: time enough for callow, irresponsible youth to pass, somewhat abruptly, into manhood.

Over and above these physical and metaphysical details, each country has imparted also its own peculiar military education. In Egypt, for instance, where the only duty of any importance is to avoid sunstroke, an intelligent junior officer receives his first shattering suspicion that all is not gold that glitters: in other words, that such gorgeous personages as generals and staff officers are gods with feet of clay, mere symbols of a non-existent leadership. The pill is such a hard one to swallow that the volunteer neophyte inevitably gags, — until, in Serbia, for the first time face to face with an enemy who smites him hip and thigh and forces him to leave behind both guns and the dead bodies of comrades, the pill is rammed down and it is henceforward a part of his knowledge that the Staff is nothing but a broken reed.

By the time he reaches Cambrai, having survived

hardship, physical ills and spiritual disillusionment, he is, in his own estimation, the complete soldier, the hardened veteran. In point of fact, he has acquired nothing but the alphabet, barely enough to prepare him for the education that is about to begin.

The quartette in the hole in the ground consisted of the Major and three lieutenants.

Externally it would have been impossible for four human beings to know one another better. Their manner of eating, washing, smoking, sleeping, scratching, talking, were common property. There could be no privacy, — except in that inner sanctum of the mind, deep beneath the facet held up for daily view. And while, in this abnormal physical intimacy, each formed an accurate estimate of the other's character and capabilities both as man and as officer, each retained his point of ego beyond which the others might not pass.

The Major, Francis Bradford, was an old Oxford running blue who, for years, had devoted one night a week to religious work at the Oxford Mission in the slums of Whitechapel and who had spent his annual summer holiday as a volunteer in the Officers' Training Corps, not at all in anticipation of war, but because many of his friends were in it and they all had a good time together.

Those amateur soldier beanfeasts had given them immediate precedence at the outbreak of war, so much so that the greater number of the group were already dead. Francis Bradford had earned his majority and a D.S.O. in the first battles of the Somme. Not counting a jagged splinter in the abdomen, the

price he paid was the total loss of all religious sense. The spectacle and experience of warfare among Christian peoples had wiped out the old creed and written a new one in letters of blood. Its first article read: There is no God.

His dossier of his juniors was brief but enlightening. Of Tom Ingleside he had jotted down, "Functions well. Should command a battery." Of Jack, "Ditto." And of the other officer, Mason, "Unknowledgable, but full of guts. Can do."

Translated into terms of daily living, this meant that unpleasant tasks involving responsibility — and therefore, by a simple front line corollary, of a highly lethal nature — were intrusted turn and turn about to Tom and Jack. Little Mason's chance would come later when he had unlearned his depot training and acquired trench wisdom.

Neither Tom nor Jack knew anything about the spiritual upheaval through which their commanding officer had passed. They knew him for a lean man of perhaps forty, with eyes like gimlets, whose hair had gone grey at the temples, whose knowledge of men and guns was all-encompassing, and whose mere presence brought with it a sense of security. They had never seen him flurried, never heard him give a useless order; and had observed excited colonels and flatulent generals reduced to nullity by the Major's serene rejection of all "eye-wash."

The result was a group of corporals and sergeants who refused promotion if it entailed transfer to another battery, and three lieutenants who gave the best they had.

The third of these was little Mason who, but for

the war, would have lived and died in his Yorkshire village. Fat, short, only just out of his teens, he was a lamb to the slaughter who laughed all the way. His north country accent was a delight, as was his naïve habit of producing the photograph of his "girl" and proudly proclaiming her name, age, and charms to all and sundry. He was like a pot-bellied puppy, grinning and wagging his tail in everybody's face and getting under everybody's feet. Never having been stepped on or smacked on the nose, he was unaware that such possibilities existed; and, since friendliness begets friendliness, they all liked him, even while pulling his leg unmercifully.

Their whole world had narrowed down to a pin point, — the battery: first of all, the four of them, huddled in their hole in the ground, or, if they were lucky, a cellar, which was the axis of their functionings, the tiny hub around which their tiny lives revolved; and secondly the sergeants and gunners, each one of whom had acquired a definite entity in the common scheme of things.

The next battery was as far away as one star from another, and as meaningless. If they got it in the neck, you thanked God it was them and not yourselves.

The people at headquarters, the colonel, the adjutant, were mere voices, usually unpleasant, heard, altogether too frequently, over the field telephone.

A terrific drumfire to north or south, which made the ground tremble underfoot like the deep bourdon of an organ playing the Dead March for innumerable victims, was hardly a matter of comment, provided your own sector was quiet.

There was no outside world. Places like London,

Paris, home, belonged to another life, another epoch. There was only the hole in the ground. There was a gramophone in it, and when there was no war on, you could play it and torture yourself with music and a moment's dreaming. Or you could all sing to it and pretend that you didn't care a damn, and laugh uproariously at a lot of dirty jokes. And then, with the darkness, the ammunition wagons would come rumbling and creaking and cursing, and the sergeant in charge would crouch into the hole and hand over the letters, — far-off whispers that said nothing and everything, that took you out of it all for just as long as you could spin out the reading of them once and twice, till you knew them by heart and tucked them into your breast pocket as a talisman.

And for Jack, now that he could see him once more without Molly in between, there was Tom again, — who ate bully beef as if he liked it, who worked till he dropped and made his section the best in the battery, who had mastered gunnery with that concentrated frown of his just as, at school, he had mastered Euclid; old Tom, who always had tobacco when he, Jack, had run out, or money, when he was broke. And it wasn't any one of these things, or the sum total of them; it was the fact of him, the awareness of him, that made you go on hanging on in this slough of despond that they called war.

Chapter Two

Two candles, stuck in their own wax on what had once been a kitchen table, threw a sickly glow on the Major's face as he bent over a letter.

Behind him could be made out pit-props and cross-beams supporting the ceiling of a cellar. They were in luck.

There were four bunks built on to the props. On one of them lay Jack, fully dressed, a gas mask on his chest, the mouthpiece ready for instant use in case an extra wave should come seeping down. He was smoking a pipe, listening to the thud of shells above that made the candle flames dance, and wondering whether little Mason was all right out there.

In another corner of the room, mother-naked, with a canvas bucket of water at his feet, Tom was competing with the unpleasantness of seven days and nights without even his boots off once.

A clammy sweat glistened on the cellar walls. The exit was covered with thick gas blankets. The earth floor was trodden deep with muddy straw. The air was a composite of tobacco, lachrymatory gas and the frowst of unclean human bodies.

Presently Jack looked at his wrist watch. The illuminated hands pointed to three-fifteen. "A sweet night!" he muttered, and heaved himself up from the comfort of the rabbit wire which was his mattress. "Mason's hour's up," he announced generally.

"I think I'd better go out and see what's become of him."

The Major grunted.

"Half a minute," said Tom, "and I'll come along."

"You certainly damn well won't!" said the Major. He looked round at Jack. "Take a signaller with you."

"Right, sir!" said Jack. He winked at Tom, and went out into the adjoining cellar where sat a corporal at a telephone on a ration box, and half a dozen inert shrouded bodies snored on ground sheets.

The Major glanced at Tom. There was a suspicion of a grin behind his clipped moustache. "This is no wet nursery," he said. "I can't afford to lose more than one officer at a time!"

Tom smiled. "One makes one's little economies, eh?"

Jack caught the corporal's eye. "Who's had the longest sleep?"

"Well, sir, Jones got down to it an hour ago." He pointed to one of the bodies. "That's 'im."

Jack went over and touched the sleeping man with his foot. "Come on," he said. "We're going out to look for Mr. Mason."

Jones kicked off the blanket and sat up. "Shall I bring a telephone, sir?"

"Yes!" said Jack. While the man finished lacing his boots and slung an instrument over his shoulder, he gave the corporal a cigarette and lit one himself. He held out the packet to Jones. "Have one?"

"Thank you, sir!" said Jones. He took one and put it in his pocket.

Jack led the way back into the officer's half of the

cellar. "I'll 'phone in from each gunpit," he said, lifting the inner gas blanket. Followed by the signaller, he disappeared up the steps.

With a cautious sniff to see if gas masks were necessary, they emerged into a strange world tortured and blasted out of all shape, a world in which to preserve life they had been forced to acquire new habits, new discernments, new instincts even. At any moment the failure to interpret some given sound, or the omission of instant obedience to the interpretation, might mean extinction.

Even as they came up from the cellar, a roar like the arrival of a subway train from its tunnel made both men throw themselves on their faces. There followed a devastating explosion, clouds of acrid black cordite smoke, the vicious scream of jagged bits of steel; and where, a moment previously, there had stood the wall of a house with its front door intact, there was now nothing but a fuming hole with burned edges.

"These are dropping at half-minute intervals," said Jack quietly, "so there's no flying hurry. We'll head for Number One gun."

He "headed" rapidly, however, following a winding pathway between the charred stumps of what, a few days back, had been a pleasant fringe of woods girdling the town. It had been nice to smoke a pipe there and watch the sun go down and listen to the birds. But for four days and nights the enemy had concentrated every kind of gun on the town, gas, incendiary and seventeen-inch shells. In the pale light that preceded the dawn, the entire sky behind them was blood red. Most of the town was still on fire.

In every direction the air above their heads was alive with the orchestrated notes of moving shells, like the wind through the strings of a harp made by giants. Every few yards they had to plaster themselves against the earth, only to hurry on again with pumping hearts until the next burst flattened them once more. On reaching the first gun they dived breathlessly into the shallow sandbagged dug-out where the sergeant and gunners were crouched with the telephone.

"Everything O.K.?" asked Jack.

"Yes, sir!"

"Good! Seen anything of Mr. Mason?"

"Not since this afternoon."

"Oh! . . . Well, 'phone in and report that I've been here."

"Very good, sir!"

The next gun, twenty yards distant, had not seen Mason either, and Jack spoke his thought aloud to the signaller. "He must have taken cover with the advanced section."

Jones gave a sickly grin. "Just our luck, sir! Look what's dropping over there!"

The battery had been shelled out of its original position where the six guns had all been in a regulation line. Now they were split into three different units, of which the advanced one was a quarter of a mile forward of the others, in front of the lunatic asylum, now a tumbled ruin. It was Jack who had dug them in, with the loss of three gunners, two drivers and four horses. The enemy didn't hate the place worse than he did.

By the time he had visited the third and fourth

guns he had an attack of "wind-up." As Jones had pointed out, there was a special barrage on the asylum, and there was no possible way around it. They had to go through. He could feel his stomach curl up. Damn that little fool Mason! Why the hell. . . . The palms of his hands were sweaty.

It would have been perfectly admissible for Jack not to attempt to go through that barrage. He could have returned to the comparative shelter of the centre section and waited for a lull since there had been no S.O.S. from the infantry and the battery was not firing. Therefore the gunners of the advanced section would have left their guns, under Mason's instructions, and taken cover somewhere to a flank.

As he stood there, slit-eyed, cold to the marrow, these reasons for not going on projected themselves into his mind, clamored for recognition; but above them all was the relation of himself to the job in hand. Supposing Mason were not under cover, had been hit? To wait for a lull in the face of that possibility was to admit his own moral bankruptcy. Therefore, fundamentally, it didn't matter whether Mason were hit or not. Not to go forward would smear his own picture of himself; and, in the wholesale smashing of definitions and values which had been going on since the war had gripped him, that was almost the only thing left to hold on to.

He threw away his cigarette. "I was in Egypt for nine months and I used to think what an utter waste of life it was! . . . God! . . . This looks like a belly crawl from now on. Let's get on with it!"

Jones tightened the strap of his telephone. "I'd take Egypt, all right!" he muttered.

Jack led on to the edge of the barrage, and in proportion as he grew near a cold rage possessed him. Why should a man have to crawl forever on his belly? It was against manhood, an insult to life! He'd be damned if he'd do it! If it was his turn to stop a shell, he'd stop it anyhow, in a mess like that! It was absurd to muck about and try to dodge a million at once! . . . He turned to Jones and snapped, "Stick close! We're going straight through!" And then, with slumped shoulders, he walked steadily in.

Like the vegetation of some Biblical hell, black bushes of death with centres of flame grew up all round them, floated away, their places immediately taken by another crop, which in turn dissolved as others spurted into being. Through the syncopated roar of these bursts came the high whine of the steel splinters, as though a plague of angered hornets was lusting for a victim.

In some part of Jack was a wild desire to run, like an animal tied to a rope, scratching, tearing and screaming in its efforts to get free. But it was taking place in some outlying pasture of his mind, remote from the core of him which had shrunk in on itself, tightly, and sent out the single order, — walk!

To see those two infinitesimal figures come staggering out of that place a few minutes later was something to marvel at. You would have said that only men purged of all human desire could have endured it.

Without change of pace they walked on, ten yards, twenty yards, fifty. . . . There was the advanced section. It was Jones who gave a cry, — a queer, animal noise.

From a tumbled mass of earth and wreckage that had been a gun pit stuck up a pair of field boots.

"Oh, my God!" Jack broke into a run and clawed up the mound, sick with the vision of the rest of Mason planted head down in the filthy mud. "Get a shovel from the other gun pit, quick!" He laid hold of one of those stiff legs and pulled, at first gently — it might part from the body and come away in his hands — then fiercely, with every muscle straining. It was no good. He dropped to his knees and, with panic in his heart, began scratching away the earth that held Mason so tightly.

Jones came running with a spade.

At that moment there was a pause in the barrage, like the moment between two claps of thunder. Miles away orders were being given. Unmindful, the two went on digging, one with the shovel, the other with bare hands. Then the inferno broke loose again, a few hundred yards farther away and to a flank.

By this time Mason's body was exposed to the waist. His legs felt warm. Perhaps there was still time. Sweat was dropping from Jones' face.

"Here!" said Jack, and snatched the shovel.

As he flung away great clods, the limp body sagged against the hole; and presently Jack dropped the shovel and drew the rest of him out.

There was no mud on Mason's face. He lay there with his eyes closed, a suggestion of a smile at the corners of his mouth. He might have been asleep.

Jack caught him by the shoulder and shook him. "Mason!" he cried. "Mason!"

There was some quality in the inert man, some emanation, which made every instinct of life in Jack

recoil. The thing that lay there was no longer Mason, the kid they had all ragged in the cellar. Death had given him another personality, had made him terrifying.

"Is he all right?" panted Jones.

Jack caught his breath and put a shaking hand under the boy's tunic. "I . . . I can't feel anything. Oh, God, why didn't I get here in time!" He stood up and brushed the sweat off his face with a sleeve. Unconsciously he needed that moment to get hold of himself. "You'd better find out where the rest of the gunners are and tell Sergeant Bates to get into action again. I'll . . . I'll carry him back."

"All right, sir," said Jones, and turned away.

Alone with the body, Jack bit down a desire to call Jones back. It was absurd to be scared of Mason just because he was dead, — perfectly childish. . . . He took a deep breath and, not daring to look at its face, drove himself to pick up the body. As he staggered along round shell holes and splintered tree trunks, there seemed to be something uncanny in the weight of it; and because he could feel his muscles shrinking involuntarily away, he clasped the body the more fiercely to him and broke into a jog trot. It set the dangling legs battering against his knees, and one of the limp hands seemed to make clutches at his side pocket. . . . He stopped once, retched and was violently sick.

By the time he came at last to the cellar steps, at the bottom of which was movement and life, Jack stiffened and began to go down the steps one at a time, with meticulous care, as though the one thing he must not do was to bump that head against the

wall. Perhaps they could do something to bring him back to life, and if he bumped him it might make all the difference.

It was not easy to elbow a way for them past the gas blankets, but he accomplished it finally and stepped into the ring of candle light and the horrible reassuring smell of the place.

Tom jumped forward. "God! . . . Where's he hit?"

Jack shook his head. Very carefully he laid the body down on the dirty straw and straightened up again. "I found him buried in Number Five gun pit. I thought there might be a chance if I hurried. For God's sake, see, one of you!" Without knowing that he did so, he wiped his hands against his breeches.

The Major took two swift strides, bent down by Mason's body, felt the heart, pushed back an eyelid. "They've got him . . . poor little devil!" He stood up again and turned to Jack. "How about the gun?"

Jack looked at him with a queer laugh. "The gun. . . . Oh, yes. That's much more important, isn't it! . . . I left the signaller to collect Sergeant Bates and start digging it out."

The Major gave him a quick look. Then he said to Tom, "Better get out there and see to it! . . . Corporal Higgins! Send two of your men here to carry Mr. Mason's body upstairs. It's got to go down to headquarters to-night on the ration wagon. And get me the adjutant on the phone!"

Tom reached for his tin hat and put it on. On his way out he brushed against Jack's elbow. "Easy, old lad!" he whispered, and dived past the gas blanket.

Blinking with sleep, two signallers came out of the

other half of the cellar and laid clumsy hands on Mason's feet and shoulders. In their efforts to get past the blanket they dropped him.

Jack started. "Be careful, damn you!"

With a muttered "Sorry, sir!" they picked the body up again.

White-faced and sick, Jack watched a dragging hand bump from step to step until the blanket fell back into place.

The Major came over. There was a tumbler in his hand, half full of whisky. "Here!" he said. "You look as if you could do with this."

The boy's strained eyes went to the older man's. "Why couldn't they let that kid alone!" he burst out. "This filthy, bloody war! . . . Christ, can't we end it?"

The Major held Jack's eyes for a moment. Then he said quietly, "So you've come as far as that, eh? I'd reached that point at the end of '15, — while you were joy-riding in Egypt! For quite a while I thought I wasn't going to be able to stand it. . . . Odd how these things go in cycles, isn't it? My own interest in it now is purely scientific, the observation of a human phenomenon, and a comparatively unimportant one at that, a mere paragraph in a page of evolution! After all, how many of us have even heard of the Mongolian invasion? That was quite a war too, you remember! They used to leave as many as seventy thousand dead on one battlefield, — and now here we all are, seven hundred years later, having another go at it! . . . There'll be some one else in Mason's place to-morrow, and perhaps in mine the day after. It would be all the same if we died in our

beds. Things have to go on. . . . See what I mean? Here, lap this down!"

Jack took the tumbler. There was something vaguely familiar about "things having to go on." Hadn't he already learned it somewhere or other? When was it? . . . He shook his head and gulped down the whisky.

Chapter Three

THE leave train was crowded.

On the stiff hard benches on the third class, joviality, bitterness, hope and despair were all expressed by inarticulate blasphemy. Most of these "simple soldiers" had come straight out of the trenches and were lousy and mud-caked. Some sang. Some shouted and quarrelled. Some slept stertorously through the racket, the sleep of utter exhaustion. Here and there bottles of cheap cognac had made their appearance, and their owners were already drunk, shouting to all the world what they would do when they saw a woman again.

The Military Police looked the other way and heard nothing, — perhaps their greatest claim to salvation on the day of judgment.

In the dirty, greasy comfort of the "first class" were officers of all ranks, arms and conditions of servitude, — excepting only Staff officers who did not risk the contamination of a vulgar leave train, but were taken to and from the Channel boat in Staff automobiles.

Some of the younger ones were as drunk and as frankly lascivious as the privates. Others laughed immoderately as they told of raids and "strafes" and how priceless it was to heave a bomb at a Jerry's guts when the bastard threw his hands up and yelled "Kamerad!" Others sat very still, slumped in their

seats, staring at nothing, hearing nothing. All smoked incessantly.

But whether officer or private, drunk or sober, noisy or silent, their behavior had a common quality of hysteria, as though, while they had crawled out to momentary safety, the great shadow was still upon them, driving each to an equally futile gesture for release.

A little dazed by the unexpectedness of it, Jack Ingleside sat in a corner seat, gazing with growing excitement at houses with roofs on, real cows in fields that were not pock-marked with shell holes, women and children who stood and waved as the train rolled through wayside stations. It didn't matter that it was raining, that the village streets were nothing but churned mud. The spectacle of people who were not soldiers, of shops with things you could buy, produced a sense of shock, of unreality, of desire. For more than a year he had not seen them. . . . To be out of range of any shell, to breathe air that was not reeking with gas, to be sitting in a railway train again, and a train that was going away from the Front, away from that death trap of a cellar! Oh, God, if only he need never go back! If only none of them need ever go back! If the thing could stop, today, now! There would be quiet again then, and if a man burst into tears at the sight of a bird on a tree, everybody would understand. There would never be any misunderstanding again. Everybody would be so intent on living, on opening one's eyes morning after morning to a new day, a day without agony, at the end of which you could take your clothes off and go to bed, safe. . . . Would it ever happen? Or

was this hell going on and on until every one of them was wiped out? It was so big that it had run away with them. They were caught in their own machine. There was no man now who could stop it. It might still be going on when those children out there would be big enough to be marched into it and killed in their turn.

Jack shivered, and his eyes went from face to face of the men on the opposite seat.

But for little Mason he would not have been there. As a result of that episode, the Major had concluded that the best anodyne for Jack would be a fortnight's leave, and he had made it his business to see that he got it immediately. Until the leave warrant had been sent over from headquarters, he had made no mention of it; then he pushed it across the table to Jack and said, "Your horse is on the way up from the wagon line. You've got to be out of here in ten minutes. . . . Bring me back a tobacco pouch, will you? Mine's begun to leak into my pocket."

Eight minutes later Tom had walked out with him to where the horse stood drooping in the downpour; and only when they had said good-bye, and he had swung into the saddle, did Tom hand him up a letter, with a smile that did not quite hide trouble, and say, "Give this to Molly, will you? And ask her why the hell she doesn't write!"

In the casual dialect of his kind, Jack, smiling back, tucked the letter into his pocket and said, "Righto! . . . Cheerio!" and touched his spurs to his horse.

Chapter Four

JACK came out of the barber shop at the bottom of the Grande Rue and stood there for a moment, smoothing out five and ten franc notes into a manageable bundle.

For the last hour he had yielded himself to the ecstatic pleasure of a shave, a haircut, a shampoo, a friction, a face massage, a manicure, — everything they could do to him. All he needed now was an hour or so in a hot bath and he would begin to feel human again . . . perhaps.

First of all, though, he would have dinner, — not at the Officers' Club, where they'd give you camouflaged *Maconochie,* but at the best restaurant in town, where the food would be French and the wine, if they had any left, worth drinking. . . . How were Tom and the Major getting on back there? Being shelled to hell probably! How extraordinary it was to be able to feel pleasure at being in a town again, at the idea of a meal with a tablecloth and thin glasses when the others were sticking it in the damned line! Man was essentially a selfish beast. It was as though every compartment of him were locked off from the others, — one for sympathy, one for selfishness, one for pain, and so on through the list. And now that he was on the way home, with about three hours to go for the boat, the sympathy one was a mere echo, purely subordinate.

As he tucked the money away into a bill-fold and moved away from the door of the shop, a large Staff car stopped with a jerk, all its breaks squealing in protest at the edge of the pavement. He heard his name called in a voice that brought him up short, set his heart pounding as though a sudden barrage had dropped. He stood staring as though he were looking at a ghost, a ghost in khaki whose thick curls were not susceptible to discipline and escaped from under the tight-fitting cap.

"Molly!" he gasped.

For an indefinite moment it seemed as if she had nothing to say. Her brown eyes clung to his, then changed their expression as though she had sent them forward as a search party, to explore, to gather information. Her throat moved. With a little catch in her breath she said, "Get in! We'll drive somewhere."

Jack got in. His heart was still hammering against his ribs, his throat as dry as a piece of leather. Almost gingerly he sat down beside her, so aware of her, physically, that he dared not look at her now. He was conscious of crossing the crowded square, of some enormous power shooting them along the quay, past the leave boat where it sat waiting for the tide, and then the Wimereux road began to flow beneath their wheels. . . . She was going to marry Tom when the war was over. He had got to give her a letter which was in his pocket. He had got to ask her why the hell she didn't write. . . . There would be time for that, presently, when she asked for him.

But Molly didn't ask for him. She sent the car up

the hill like a bullet, her lips tight, her eyes straight ahead as though her search party had brought her all the information she desired, — more; for presently, as though saying something to herself, she whispered, "Oh, my dear, they've hurt you! . . . They've hurt you!"

Jack heard it. He had to look at her. There were tears on her cheek. . . . All his knuckles cracked as he clenched his hands. He was dreaming. She hadn't really said that. It was something she might have said if . . . if only . . .

They were up on the headland now. Beneath them on the left was a grey, cold sea. Far ahead was a pattern of tiny bell tents. As Molly stopped the car and switched off the engine, the thin silver note of a bugle was like an ironical comment.

For a moment both remained motionless, except that Molly slowly opened the spark lever and as slowly shut it again. Then, as though the embarrassment were becoming unbearable, she pulled off her gauntlets and, with an almost muscular effort, turned to him. With that, her effort was spent. She tried to smile, to say something casual; but her eyes were still wet and her chin quivered.

Starved of all gentleness for two years, the nearness of Molly had shaken Jack profoundly. In Egypt and in Serbia he had schooled himself to put her out of his mind, to paint over the scar with the iodine of soldiering, to cauterise it with war. . . . Even outside the barber shop he knew that he had failed. The sight of her had ripped the scar open. Her whisper of a moment ago annihilated his defenses, left him weak and trembling. Now, when she turned to

him, the quivering face and those eyes which had no guard in front of them, which were crying almost as if she had said aloud, — "Can't you see I love you!" swept away his last feeble effort at control.

He put out a shaking hand and touched hers. In a single movement they were in each other's arms, clinging to each other, Molly sobbing as though her heart were breaking.

Two tiny atoms flung together in this crazy madness which people called life, two rats in a trap with the dogs yapping outside, but they loved each other and in this first great moment of mutual revelation they forgot that death was around the corner, that in a matter of days Jack must go marching back around that corner to face it minute by minute, hour by hour. And yet the subconscious awareness of it was in their hands and in their eyes which could not let go, in the incoherence of the few words they spoke.

He kissed her lips, her wet eyes, her throat, her hands, and all he could say was, "Molly! . . . Molly!" in a queer unnatural voice, holding her shaking body in his arms.

"Jack! . . . Oh, Jack! . . . My dear!" she sobbed. In the thickening darkness they sat, presently, and looked into each other's eyes, hand locked in hand, shoulders touching.

The sea had faded out. The distant tents were strung with lights. A heavy truck roared past them, rumbled into the murk and died away.

"I thought you didn't care!" she whispered.

"It's been most frightfully lonely without you!" said Jack. "And after I began to see through this war business, there wasn't much to hang on to. If

only we could make a bolt from it, escape from this ghastly mess!"

"The only thing we can do is to pray that it will end! It's awful. You look a million years older, Jack!"

"I don't see how anybody keeps sane," said Jack. "Don't let's talk about it. Help me to forget it. Tell me about yourself. How long have you been out here? Mother wrote and told me you were driving a car, but I thought you were probably in England."

Molly shook her head. "I've been driving an ambulance for a year in Etaples. I didn't think I had any tears left! I couldn't stand it finally. I had to ask for a transfer, and a few weeks ago they put me on to driving an R.A.M.C. general. . . . But what are you doing in Boulogne? Leave?"

Jack nodded. "But if you're stationed here I'll stay. We . . ."

Molly sat up with a jerk. "Stationed here! Heavens, what's the time?" She dived for her wrist watch and sighed with relief as she glanced at the illuminated dial. "We've still got half an hour! Then I must pick up my general and drive him back to camp."

"Half an hour! Is that all we've got, — thirty minutes!" Jack gave a bitter laugh. "Then it'll be all over, and God knows whether I shall ever see you again! Damn your general! Damn the whole blasted war!"

Molly caught his hand and pressed it to her breast. "Don't, Jack! Don't! . . . I love you! Of course you're going to see me again!"

In a sudden agony of remembrance Jack's fingers

tightened on hers. "Oh, God!" he exclaimed. "There's Tom! . . . We've forgotten Tom!"

Molly gave a little cry.

"I've . . . I've got a letter for you from him in my pocket," said Jack. "He told me to ask you why the hell you didn't write."

Molly's face was white.

"Why . . . didn't you write?" There was urgency in Jack's voice.

"Can't you guess why?" said Molly. "Can't you see that I've found out about myself, that I couldn't go on writing to him when I didn't love him!"

"Then . . . then why . . ." Jack stopped.

"Go on!" insisted Molly. "Ask me why I said I would marry him. I know why, now! It was because I was a fool, a vain idiot! Because I was hurt and wanted to hit out! . . . I expected you to tell me you loved me after that day on the golf course . . . d'you remember? . . . and when you wrote a letter that didn't even suggest that you cared . . . I . . . I said yes to Tom out of rotten spite. I wanted to hurt you, to show you I didn't care! I was a detestable beast. And then I've been a coward as well! I didn't dare to write to Tom and tell him. I let it hang on. I just stopped writing, hoping he would find out that way. And now, every time I see a letter from him, I could die of shame. I hate myself! I'm no good! . . . Will Tom ever forgive me? Can you ever forgive me? Will you ever want to see me again now that I've told you?"

"Forgive you! My dear, it's for you to forgive me! The whole thing's my fault! I was a fool and a coward! If only I'd had the guts to tell you, none of

this would ever have happened! I've made you suffer, and I've smashed Tom up, or shall when I face him with this! And simply because I was so damned young. That's all it was. I was scared of the truth, scared of taking chances!" He grasped her hand, held it in both of his. "I'm desperately sorry about Tom, but I can't lose you now; I can't give you up again! It isn't fair. It isn't right. And you're in it now and that changes everything. He'll have to see that! Why, from the minute I walked into the drawing-room and saw you sitting there I've loved you so much that I was trying to build my life round you, trying to plan things so that I could come to you later. I wanted that job in Africa because it meant success, because it would have given me enough money to marry you! Couldn't you see? Couldn't you feel that I was avoiding you because I was afraid of you, of myself? When Tom came back that night and told me you were going to marry him, I think I died. Something in me died! I hated Tom! I could hardly stand the sight of him while we were training in England. I've had to fight myself to take him back again. I hated you too! I've called you frightful things, and all the time I was loving you. Tom's got to see that! He'll have to see that! And yet, because I've been through it, I'm scared to tell him. He's up there, just hanging on to the idea of you! What can we do? It's my job to tell him, not yours, but do you think I could possibly wait till the war's over? You've no idea what it's like up there."

"Oh, why did I do it?" cried Molly. "I don't want Tom to be hurt!"

"It's got nothing to do with you!" insisted Jack. "It's my fault."

Once more Molly fumbled for her wrist watch. "Oh, Jack, I must go! I'm late! I can't bear to go!"

"Kiss me first!" said Jack.

With a little cry Molly wound her arms round his neck. Jack held her very tightly. "I love you!" he said. "When can I see you again?"

"Will you give me one day of your leave?"

"I'll give you the whole fourteen! I'll stay in Boulogne and we . . ."

Molly shook her head. "I can't get leave too. It's impossible. But if you could come back a day early, I might ask for that one day!"

"One day?" Jack nodded. "I think we've earned that! All right, then. Twelve days from to-morrow I'll be here. Where shall we meet?"

Molly started the engine. "I'll show you," she said. "Get out your pencil and I'll give you my address. You'll write to me?"

"I haven't begun to tell you anything yet," said Jack. "I don't know whether I shall be able to on paper, but I'll try!"

As she turned the car and started down the hill, Molly gave him her address. When he had written it, she drove with one hand and gave him the other. Both were silent as the twinkling lights came up to meet them.

She slowed up and stopped in the deep shadow of the fish market.

"Here's where I'll meet you," she said. "Twelve days from to-morrow at ten in the morning."

"Twelve days from to-morrow at ten in the morning!" repeated Jack. It was a prayer, a vow, a sacrament.

"You must get out now," said Molly. "I've got to go up to the Officers' Club."

"Can't you take me there?"

"I'd rather say good-bye here."

To say good-bye is to die a little. . . .

No one of the passers-by could have imagined that the tall officer staring after the Staff car couldn't even see it because his eyes were all blurred.

Chapter Five

INSTEAD of finding leave a merciful pause, a span of healing, Jack found that it was nothing but a physical absence from the firing line. And now that the Channel was between him and Molly, he found that although those few minutes with her were indelible, he was unable to hold her in the foreground. He needed her presence, more, the touch of her, to be able to fight off the war.

While his body sank into the softness of the armchair by the fire and he looked across at his mother, the vision of bombardment would not leave him, the moan and crash of long-range shells were ringing in his ears, the spectacle of death, of scattered limbs and rotting trunks, haunted him, oppressed him, got between him and his mother, between him and tranquillity.

Nor was there any home. The war had killed that too. He roamed from room to room and found himself a stranger, a ghost, trying desperately to get back where he had once belonged, seeing it all but unable to touch, to speak, to make his presence known. His mother, sitting there with her needlework, was in another world, and there was no communication. What could he tell her of the things he knew, of what life had cheated them of out there? She wouldn't understand. If he put his head in her lap and sobbed,

she would suffer and comfort him, or try to; but she wouldn't understand. The gulf was there, — full of terrible knowledge and disillusionment, pressed down with things she would never know. They could only look at each other mutely from opposite sides.

Even music was denied him. His hands had been claimed by king and country with the rest of him. His fingers dragged and stumbled over the notes like walking-wounded on their way to a field ambulance. He shut the piano, after five horrible minutes, and plunged out of the house, — mind and body calling for Molly again.

The thought of her was like a distant well in the desert. She was hope and life. She was courage to go on. She was the gentleness of days that might be, the reason for all the beauty of summer evenings, the divine companion, the sharer of all the little things of every day, the meaning of creation. . . . What a fool he had been ever to worry about money. It was simply an instrument. And success, which was nothing but personal vanity, disguised and glorified. The only thing that mattered was living, — living together, working together, for each other, completing each other. That was man's problem, if he only knew it, his eternal search. Anything else was false, distorted, irrelevant. . . . He knew it now, saw it as clearly as though he had stepped out of his young, discarded, blind self into an older and more sharpened awareness. If they took Molly away now, the only mercy would be to stop a shell. . . . But he was going to see her in ten days, in nine, in eight . . .

Meanwhile there was Tom, — old Tom, who had stood by him through thick and thin in every single

thing they had ever done since they were kids! How hideously unfair it was that in this one thing they were in each other's way!

Jack agonised about it. How and when should he tell him? He dismissed the suggestion that he had made to Molly, of leaving the matter till the end of the war. That was out of the question. One couldn't face him day after day, leaving him in a sort of fool's paradise. Instead of being a kindness, it would be a refinement of cruelty. The only possible thing was to tell him as soon as he got back to the battery . . . somehow or other!

With all too vivid prevision Jack could see himself get off his horse somewhere near the battery position, probably behind that bit of wall at the cross-road, hand over the reins to the driver accompanying him, see him turn and trot off again. Then he himself would walk quickly along the shell-pocked road, watching out for that corner where they dropped one regularly at two-minute intervals, and then plunge down the cellar steps.

If the Major were there, it would make things easier. All Tom could say then was, "Hullo! Have a good leave? How's Mother?"

That would give him time to get back into things and watch for the right moment, when some particular mood would offer him a way to lead up to it.

On the other hand, if Tom should happen to be alone when he dropped into the cellar, almost the first thing he would be bound to ask was, "Well, did you see Molly?"

Perhaps that might be the moment, — if only he could find the right words; if only he could force

himself not to funk it! But funk or not, right words or not, it was going to be the hardest thing he ever tried to do!

Perhaps, when he saw Molly, she would have found some way to help him tell Tom.

Chapter Six

At nine fifty-five on the morning of the twelfth day Jack came to a halt outside the fish market. His worried eyes went up the street and then down it.

Last night when he landed it had been raining. This morning it had stopped, but a heavy, grey sky hung sullenly over the town, making the red-tiled buildings round the port look cold and cheerless and the sea beyond wet and sloppy. He had dined and spent the night at the Officers' Rest House, — an army hut erected for the purpose across the street from the railway station. All the talk had been of a drive that was coming off, nobody quite knew where; but underneath the facetious comment about breaking through the Hindenburg Line it was all too easy to detect the apprehension that swept like a wave over the group of officers, all of whom, in a matter of hours, would be back in the line, many of whom, in a matter of hours, would be dead. Face muscles tightened, eyes became furtive, more whisky was ordered, laughter grew a little too boisterous. . . .

It was like a cloud over Jack's mind as he lit one cigarette from another, as ten o'clock slipped by and there was no sign of Molly . . . There would be forward batteries right out in the open, a liaison officer to go over the top with the infantry, that ghastly hour before dawn with chattering teeth and cold sweat pouring down your body waiting for zero

hour, praying that at the last minute it might all be cancelled, and then — the shambles! . . . He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, then looked at his wrist watch again. Ten past. Where the devil was Molly? Had that blasted Brass Hat refused to let her come? He'd got to see her before he went back into the line! Life owed him that! If there was any decency or justice left, they couldn't cheat him out of that! . . . And then, as his watch said fifteen minutes past, he saw the car turn at the bridge and head straight for him. He threw away his cigarette and was on the running board before it had stopped. "Thank God!" he said.

Molly changed into second as he slipped into the seat beside her, came back into third when the car was under way, and then caught his hand and held it tight for a moment. "Dear Jack!" she said. "Darling Jack! It was like a miracle to see you standing there! All the way down I kept saying to myself 'He won't be there! He won't be there!' "

Jack shot her a quick look. Did she know about this drive? "For heaven's sake?" he exclaimed. "But I told you I'd be here! I wrote you I'd be here!"

"I know!" said Molly. "But in twelve days . . . who can tell anything twelve days ahead? You might have had a telegram ordering you to return at once! I can still hardly believe it's true!" She flashed a look at him with shining eyes.

Jack nodded. "Let's forget all that!" he said. "Whatever happens to-morrow they can't take away to-day! . . . Are we going to drive far? If I don't kiss you soon, I shall start breaking up the car!"

Molly gave him her hand again. "Try and satisfy

yourself for the moment with that!" she said. "We're going to have a picnic and eat on the grass and pretend that the sun's blazing down on us and be utterly and completely happy. . . . I stopped in the town — that was why I was late — and bought two loaves with borrowed bread tickets, and some slices of beef — at least I hope it's beef and not horse: they swore it was! — and half a Camembert, and a bag of apples, and a bottle of Graves. Do you like Graves? I do hope so! And we shall have to drink it out of the bottle because I couldn't manage glasses. But I did remember to have the cork almost drawn!"

Jack pressed his lips to the palm of her hand. "I'm speechless with admiration! I worship beef and cheese and apples, and I could drink Graves by the quart!"

"Heavens!" said Molly. "There's only one bottle. Are you going to leave me any?"

"If you're very good!" said Jack. "Incidentally," he added, "you may be interested to know that I've brought an addition to this picnic."

"You have! . . . What?"

"Well, first of all a box of the cigarettes you used to smoke in the studio."

"You darling!" cried Molly. "And to think I never knew you even noticed what cigarettes I smoked! . . . Oh, my dear, we've got so many things to make up!"

"More than two years of them!" said Jack. "But I've made a beginning already. I stopped in town on the way through and bought one of them. It's in my pocket now!"

Molly glanced round at him. "What do you mean?"

Jack smiled. "I thought that would fetch you!" he said. "Like to see?"

"I'm dying to see!" said Molly.

"H'm!" said Jack. "Don't you think it'd be better to wait till we stop the car?"

Molly gave a little laugh. "*Touché!* That makes us all square. Well . . ." She looked around. To the right there was a large camp of many tents, but it was at least half a mile away. Ahead on the road was a train of Army Service Corps lorries, but they were going in the same direction as she was. From behind there was nothing to fear, because they were screened by the hood of the car.

With a sudden flood of color in her cheeks, she put her foot on the brake. "There!" she said.

The car came to a stop.

"Now show me!" said Molly quickly.

Jack shook his head. "Not until I've made up the other thing first!" He took her chin in his hand and turned her face until her eyes melted in his. "I've been living for this for twelve days!" he said. He bent forward and put his lips to hers, gently, overcome with sudden reverence at what he had seen in her eyes.

Mutely he dived into his pocket and brought out a small flat box, wrapped in white paper and fastened with a rubber band.

At the sight of it, Molly gave an exclamation.

Jack looked up. "You've guessed it?" He ripped off the band and the paper. For a moment a velvet-covered box sat in his hand. "This is the second greatest moment in my life," he said. "The greatest was twelve days ago." He flipped open the box. Against

the white satin of the case gleamed sapphires in a platinum setting.

"Do you like it?"

"Oh, Jack!" Her eyes went to his again. "I love it!" she whispered.

"Then give me your hand." He took the ring out of the box.

Molly peeled off her gauntlet and held out her left hand, the fingers wide open.

"This is to wish you all the happiness that's left in the world!" said Jack. He touched it to his lips and slipped it over her third finger. "With me!" he added, smiling.

Molly caught his hand. "With you!" she said. "And if it's China or South Africa it doesn't make any difference."

"You mean you'd come out there?"

Molly opened wide eyes. "Of course!" she said. Then she added, "I've brought you something too. I'd planned not to give it to you until we said good-by — until we got back to Boulogne, but this," she held up her ring hand, "has made me change my mind."

Jack nodded. "I was going to ask you to give me something of yours to take back with me, something I could carry round all the time."

Molly unbuttoned her breast pocket. "I hope you won't find me too heavy!" She handed him a flat leather folding case.

Jack opened it.

A snapshot of Molly smiled up at him, — Molly in a summer frock, sitting on a bank of grass, all flecked with shadows from the branch of a tree which just appeared in the top corner of the picture. She

had no hat and the breeze was playing with her hair. Her eyes looked straight into Jack's.

"Take it out," said Molly. "There's a message for you on the other side."

He took it out, as Molly started the car again.

The message was very short. "Keep me with you, always, and I'll try and keep you safe."

It wasn't even signed, but as Jack read it, a great lump grew in his throat and the words all ran together, — not because the car was going over a bumpy bit of road, but because he was held by the divine yearning for which there are no words, the desire for unity not merely of body, but of mind and soul, the all-completeness of the love of Aucassin and Nicolette, against which no earthly affliction could prevail. . . . She would try and keep him safe! They were on holy ground. It was a cry, a prayer, from the depths of her being. Already she had wrapped him round, enswathed him, with her need, her recognition, her gift.

In the middle of war he had found the way to peace.

Chapter Seven

WHEN Jack gathered his things together and tumbled out on the platform at railhead, after a night of much smoking and an occasional uneasy snatch of sleep, the first thing that struck him was the quiet.

There was none of that heavy pounding in the distance, like an enormous surf on a beach, which had been incessant when he left. There were only friendly back-area noises, — the asthmatic wheezing of the antiquated engine, the clatter of boots on asphalt, a high nasal argument between two French railway officials, the clinking of bits and impatient pawings of the group of horses that stood at the railing at the end of the station. Was it the lull before the storm?

He made his way towards the horses, picked out the friendly grin of the driver who looked after his "chargers."

" 'Mornin', sir!"

"Glad to see you, Harvey," said Jack. "Seems to be very quiet here. How are things at the battery?"

The driver grinned as he threw the reins over the horses' heads. "Grand!" he said. "Ain't bin a shell over these three days!"

No shell for three days! . . . As Jack rubbed his horse's nose and patted its neck, got mounted and pulled out his overcoat from under him, a wave of relief flooded through him. It was like a reprieve. But . . . "Any rumors going about?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Harvey. "They say we're goin' to be pulled out and sent down into a real show. I'd say we'd 'ad enough to last us for a while!"

Jack took a deep breath. The drive was true then! He tightened reluctant knees against the horse and they moved forward out of the station yard, — headed for the inevitable firing line. Presently he put his hand into his overcoat pocket. "Here!" he said, and held out a small parcel. There were six packets of cigarettes in it and as many sticks of chocolate. "I brought this for you."

Harvey trotted up from behind. "Thank you, sir! Thank you kindly!"

Jack smiled as the quaint old phrase struck his ear. How could you thank anybody "kindly?" Queer use of the word. Rather charming and full of flavor, for all that. But so extraordinarily out of place in all this. The only kindness up here was strictly against army regulations and the proper conduct of war. You were supposed to hate. You were supposed to make life hell for a man like Harvey, if he had dirty buttons or rusty spurs or unclean saddlery. You were supposed to march forward into a drive like the one that was coming off, with a merry cheer for king and country, infantry going over the top with a football! Supposed to! And it was all lies, official lies, a part of the war game. You were sorry for poor devils like Harvey; and the mere possibility of being forward battery on show day made you sweat with funk, even though you'd rather die than admit it, made you curse all the *embusqués* at headquarters and wish to God you could become one of them! . . . And yet you went on sticking it. Why? Well, the sim-

plest reason of all was that there was nothing else to do, no way to get out of it all, except at the price of a leg or an arm. If you tried to get out of it any other way, they'd line you up against a wall, and you wouldn't be reported killed in action, but simply dead. Perhaps the real reason for sticking it went deeper, was something to do with the herd instinct, — some deep need to belong, which left you with no place to go, actually or metaphorically, no village, however remote, not even a corner of the mind, if you turned your back on the rest. . . .

The voice of Harvey broke in on his thoughts.

"Beg pardon, sir! . . . D' you think I could get a leaf? I 'ad a letter yesterday and my wife's bin took bad. She's in the 'orspital. I ain't seen 'er for over eighteen months. It might do 'er a bit of good to see the old man come walkin' in. Cheer 'er up, like!"

Jack nodded. "I'll see about it as soon as I get to the battery. What's the matter with her?"

"I don't rightly know what it's called," said Harvey, "but she 'as to 'ave something cut out of her stomach."

"Not so good!" said Jack. "I'm awfully sorry. I'll see if the Major won't put you in for a special at once. . . . If this show's coming off, though, I'm afraid they may cancel all leave. Anyhow, I'll see what can be done. Let's push 'em along!" He urged the horse to a stiff trot. . . . These married men! They were fighting a sort of double war, agony both ends. . . . If Molly were his wife, would he ever dare go back on leave? How could you say good-bye after . . . after . . .

His thought went reaching back to her, but al-

ready she was a part of the past, a dream, an unreality. The sour smell of decomposition was in his nostrils, and in front of his eyes nothing but desolation, himself and Harvey the only living beings in all the landscape, — charred stumps of trees along the roadside, blown-in shelters dotting the banks, crumbling ruins of villages where men crept about like rats, diving into reeking burrows at the first hint of bombardment. At night the road would come to life again, would resound with the ghostly creak and rumble of wagons bringing ammunition and rations for artillery and machine guns, with the tired shuffle of heavily burdened troops marching in to relieve the infantry, with ambulance wagons lurching and jolting in the blackness. All this was reality, and, as he rode steadily forward, it settled upon him, claimed him for its own, pulled all his thoughts and concern forward to the battery, pushed Molly farther and farther back into the dim recesses of his mind, — as if the war atmosphere which he was breathing were a sort of ether and, in another moment, as far as the other life was concerned, he would be under.

They went on trotting, single file, till they came to the outskirts of the town. Then they dropped to a walk. Jack's hand went under his overcoat and felt for the breast pocket of his tunic. The photograph was there, safe and making safe.

He halted abruptly, slid stiffly out of the saddle, passed the rein over the horse's head and handed it to Harvey. "I won't forget about your leave," he said, and turned away.

It was like walking through some city of an extinct race of people. The silence was uncanny. His boots

rang out disturbingly on the cobbles until he began to pick his way round enormous craters, over piles of brick, charred beams, broken furniture. Once a cat appeared from nowhere, stared at him fearfully with gleaming eyes, as though man were once more the ancient enemy, ran across the street, low-bellied, and disappeared again.

On his right, in the distance, the asylum came into view. That was where they had got Mason. . . . Mustn't think of that! He looked away quickly. His mind went forward again. Who was the new man? Tom would have been functioning with him for a fortnight. Tom . . . Only a quarter of a mile to go now, and then the cellar, and . . . Tom!

Reluctance dragged at his feet, invited him to pause at the gunpits, to gain five minutes by taking a look round and checking up with Sergeant Yates and the others. There they were, over there at the guns, piling empty shell cases in readiness for sending down on the wagons that night. . . . Five minutes, that was all, just to get hold of himself, just to think of the right thing to say to Tom.

But even while one side of him fought for time, balking and struggling, the other, the side that had kept him walking through the barrage, would not allow him to yield now. There was no slackening in his pace. He went steadily on, driving himself to face it.

There were two signallers at the entrance to the cellar. They saluted as he came up. One of them — it was Jones, who had gone with him to find Mason — asked him if he had had a good leave. With some outer brain cell Jack nodded, smiled, said, "Yes,

thanks!", noticed that the gas blanket had been folded back, registered approval at the knowledge of being able to breathe decent air down there, — and all the while he was aware only of Tom sitting at the kitchen table in the candlelight.

Step by step he went down, half sideways as usual, instinctively falling into the old technique as though he had never been away. The bottom gas blanket was folded back too. He ducked his head under the brick arch, straightened up again, ready.

A stranger rose from the table. "Oh, hullo!" he said. "You must be Ingleside?" There was an upward inflection, a suggestion of need for confirmation. "My name's Wickham. I joined up the day you went on leave."

Jack's eyes were appraising the newcomer, — dark, stocky, about his own age. There was a wound stripe on his sleeve. He held out his hand. "Glad to see you," he said. "How are things?"

"Fairly peaceful," said Wickham, "barring a little strafe the other night. An S.O.S. for about fifteen minutes. Somebody got wind up, I imagine, but we popped off quite a few rounds before we were told to stand down." He grinned. "Cigarette?"

Jack shook his head. Thank goodness the fellow knew the game.

He bent over to his bunk and took off his haversack. "Where's my brother?"

"Up the chimney," said Wickham. "I'm relieving him in about fifteen minutes."

Jack nodded. "And the Major?"

"Gone to headquarters to see about the move."

"The move . . ." Jack repeated it quietly enough.

"Boulogne was full of chat about a show. This it?"

Wickham shrugged his shoulders. "All I know is that in a couple of days we entrain for somewhere, the other end of the line, they say. Hope to God it's not Wipers!"

As the newcomer began leisurely to invest himself with field glasses, gas mask and tin hat, the sound of brisk feet could be heard outside. They came clattering down the cellar steps.

Jack went forward as the Major came in. "Hullo, sir!" he said.

"Oh, hullo, Ingleside!" The Major held out his hand. "Have a good leave?"

Jack gripped the hand for a moment. "Yes, thanks!" he said.

"You're back just in time," said the Major. "The brigade's going south, — Cambrai."

"Cambrai?" echoed Wickham. "Nothing but a name to me."

The Major smiled. "By the time we get through with it, you'll know it a little better. The idea is to make history there."

"It's the drive then?" asked Jack, dry lipped.

The Major nodded. "The whole thing's hush, of course. Don't chat about this around the battery." He gathered affirmative nods from the two subalterns, and then continued, "It's the break through. A fleet of tanks to smash the line, and then the cavalry! . . . Believe me, the *Daily Mail* subscribers will have something to read over their breakfast egg!"

Wickham whistled. "Tanks, yes! But cavalry! . . . Won't those Brass Hats ever wake up, sir?"

A twinkle appeared in the Major's eyes. " 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings!' " he said. "Incidentally, don't you think you'd better get a move on? Tom Ingleside will have had time to think up one or two choice sarcasms at the top of that chilly factory chimney."

"Right, sir!" said Wickham with a laugh. He turned and ran up the cellar steps.

A photograph of every detail of the way from the cellar to the observation chimney unwound itself with a click in Jack's mind. It would take Wickham five minutes, hurrying. In seven or eight more Tom would be there. Call it fifteen minutes to go. . . . The Major's keen eyes, accustomed now to the mixture of candle-light and daylight, were on Jack's face. After a moment he nodded to himself as though satisfied. He went to the table and began to unfold maps. "A stout lad, that," he said. "He's just back from sick leave after a nice, but extremely painful blighty. A little soft still. Your brother's been saving him somewhat, but I think with all three of you here, Wickham will be able to pull his weight now."

"When do we start off for the push, sir?" Jack went back to the bunk and opened his haversack.

"The day after to-morrow," said the Major. "By the way, just tell the signaller to call the wagon line and say that I want the sergeant major and the quartermaster up to-night with the rations."

"Right, sir!" As Jack passed the table he dropped a package near the Major's elbow. "Here's your pouch," he said.

The Major's eyebrows went up. "Pouch? . . . Oh, yes. I'd forgotten. Thanks. How much was it?"

"I thought I'd like to give it to you," said Jack, "if I may?"

Surprise came into the Major's eyes. He looked as if refusal were on the tip of his tongue. But when Jack came back from the other half of the cellar, having given his message to the signaller, the Major glanced up. "Righto!" he said. "Thank you," and put the pouch in his pocket.

"By the way," said Jack, "is there any possible chance of sneaking a leave for my groom before the push? His wife's gone to hospital for a major operation. He hasn't seen her for over eighteen months."

"Where does he stand on the leave roster?" queried the Major.

"I haven't looked it up yet," said Jack. "I'll ask Corporal Brown."

"Yes. Do that!" said the Major. "You don't think he's inventing the operation? It's an old trick!"

"Lord, no! He's not that sort. For instance, when he asked me he said, 'It might do her good to see the old man come walking in. Cheer her up, like!' If he'd invented the story he couldn't possibly have said that."

"Perhaps not," said the Major. "Anyhow, get Brown to make out an application for a special. I'll sign it and you'd better go down and see the adjutant yourself. Otherwise, this move may queer it."

"Thanks," said Jack. He reached for his tin hat. "I'll go and hunt up Brown now. I think I caught sight of him checking up ammunition as I came along."

He looked at his wrist watch. There were still three minutes. Just time to get round the corner

before Tom. . . . No, you couldn't do that, damn it! . . . He put the tin hat back on the bunk. "My brother will be here in a second," he said. "I'll wait and . . . say hullo before I go along."

Jack dumped out the contents of his haversack on the bunk and picked out a packet which he put on Tom's. Then he filled a pipe and struck a match. As he did so there were footsteps outside, footsteps that he would have recognised among a thousand. The match burned his fingers. He dropped it, put the pipe back in his pocket, his hand clenched on it, his eyes on the cellar steps. Tom began to talk to a signaller, — had they got the new wire up yet from brigade? Well, he'd go down himself in the afternoon and see if he couldn't wangle a reel when nobody was looking. Both of them laughed. There came the tapping of a pipe being knocked out against the bricks, while the signaller made a remark that Jack couldn't catch. He heard Tom laugh again. Finally an ankle appeared, then the other knee, and, in a moment, a tin hat and hunched shoulders came through the arch.

"Hul–lo!" said Tom. His whole face lit up as he saw Jack. "Wickham told me you were back. By gosh, it seems like an age since you went off! How are you?"

He gripped Jack's hand.

At the sight of his brother, unshaved, with lines of tiredness round his eyes, but nevertheless a gleam in them which conveyed a strength of affection which had to be left unsaid, Jack could only return the grip. Tom was so . . . so perfectly splendid! He tried to find his voice, gave a queer laugh, took refuge behind the first thing that came handy. "You . . .

you dirty old scoundrel! You look as if you hadn't washed for a week. Lord, it's . . . it's great, isn't it!"

Their hands dropped.

Jack produced cigarettes. Tom took one and struck a match, held it out to Jack first, then lit his own. "How's . . . Mother?" he asked, blowing out a lungful of smoke.

"She's very fit and well," said Jack, "but . . ." he frowned . . . "somehow it was rather frightful being at home."

Tom's eyes came back. "Frightful? What on earth do you mean?"

Jack looked at him eagerly. "I hope to goodness you won't get it when you go," he said. "I felt as if I'd lost touch, couldn't get back. You see, one can't tell Mother about all this." He made an expressive gesture. "There was a sort of stone wall. We had nothing to say. It was . . . pretty difficult!"

For a moment Tom stared at him. Then he nodded. "By Jove!" he said. "I see what you mean! One doesn't realise that every letter home is really a lie from start to finish! . . . So that's another of the things one will have to compete with when this is over, eh? . . . God!" He shook his head, took off his tin hat and tossed it on to the bunk with a clatter. Then he struggled out of the strap of the gas mask and flung it after the hat. "It's a great war!" he muttered.

"Mother's sent you out some things," said Jack. He reached for the packet and held it out to Tom.

"Thanks," said Tom. He took it, read his name in his mother's handwriting, and shook his head again

with a sigh. Then he looked up at Jack with a sudden interrogation in both eyes. "Is there . . . anything else?"

Jack swallowed. It seemed to him that their whole past rose up and hit him in the face; and on top of it, crowning it, this three years of war, when Tom's strength had been at least half his. . . . Was that all going to be smashed? . . . How could he tell him? He wouldn't ever be able to tell him! It was impossible . . . anyhow till after the push.

"Yes," he said, "I . . . I've brought out a flock of cigars for us all."

Tom's eyes changed. "Oh — That's great, old man!" He turned away quickly.

Jack stared after him . . . Tom! My dear old thing! . . . Oh, God! . . . Then he said aloud, "I'm going down to Brigade. Anything I can do for you about that wire?"

"Wire? . . . Oh, yes." Tom's voice was flat. "Beg, borrow or steal some. We've got about enough for a pair of bootlaces, and the dirty dogs have been promising it for a week."

"I'll see what I can do," said Jack. "Are they still in the chateau?"

"Yes."

Jack picked up his hat and stumbled up the cellar steps. Tom stood, his eyes, unseeing, on his boot tips. Presently he passed a hand across his face, kicked out a chair leg from the table and sat down heavily opposite the Major. "You working on the push maps, sir?"

The Major didn't glance up. "Yes," he said. "It's Cambrai."

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "Cambrai! Who cares? I wish to God . . ."

"Wish what?"

"Oh . . . nothing!" Tom twisted his face into the semblance of a smile. "This leave business has made me restless, I suppose."

The Major nodded. "The trouble with war," he said, "is that there's too much time to think."

"Yes," said Tom. "One . . . finds things out!"

Chapter Eight

It was a good war that evening.

Four candles lent almost an air of festivity. Tom and the Major had two of them, one on each side of a chess board on the kitchen table. Wickham had another stuck on the remaining arm of a broken chair in which, with considerable dexterity, he was darning socks. The fourth was with Jack who, at full length on his bunk, lay dreaming.

In the other half of the cellar three of the signallers were already asleep, making up for many nights' omission. The man on duty sat by the telephone on a ration box, reading a magazine months old.

A gentle haze of tobacco smoke floated above the heads of the chess players, and gave an aura to the candle flames.

Presently Wickham yawned noisily, bit off an end of wool close up to the sock, folded up his mending kit and tucked it into the head of his "flea bag," the canvas contraption that was at once bed and baggage. "I'm going to turn in," he announced.

Nobody took any notice as he proceeded to take his clothes off, examine the scar on his ribs for a moment with a carefully probing forefinger, and get into a suit of orange silk pyjamas.

Then the Major said quietly, "Who's on duty tonight?"

"I am," said Tom.

Jack looked up. "Why don't you let me take it? I've had my share of sleep for a while."

Tom shook his head. "You're for the chimney at dawn. I'm gambling on a peaceful night and sleeping till breakfast. Wickham's for the early parade to-morrow."

Jack dropped off the bunk. "All right," he said. "I'll tell the signaller."

The Major knocked out his pipe and refilled it. He glanced at Tom across the chess men. "Don't you think a whisky would go well? This game's pretty tight."

"Excellent!" said Tom. He pushed his chair back and went over to the mess box. "You having one too, Jack?" he asked, as his brother returned from the signallers' quarters.

"Yes, I will," said Jack. "You carry on with the game. I'll get it."

Wickham was already between the blankets, so Jack brought three glasses. "Say when, sir!" he said to the Major.

At the proper height the Major said "when," added water, and, as the two brothers took theirs, raised his glass. "Here's to the break through!" he said. "May it end the war!"

"Please God!" said Jack fervently.

Tom laughed. "Fat chance! But here's hoping!"

Matches were struck and pipes began to draw again. Jack watched the two for a moment as they picked up the thread of the game. "Is it all right to take a chance on pyjamas to-night?" he asked.

The Major nodded. "I think so," he said. "Fritz has been behaving himself for a couple of nights."

"Good. Thanks," said Jack. He finished his drink, put his glass on top of the mess box, came back across the dirty straw, sat on the edge of the bunk and began to unwind his puttees.

"Check!" said the Major.

A gentle snore came from Wickham.

Jack placed his puttees at the foot of the bunk, kicked off his boots and stood up. He turned his back on the chess players and took Molly's photo from his breast pocket. For a long moment he gazed at it, seeing her now as one sees a stage through the wrong end of opera glasses, — infinitely small and far away. Then he put it back into his pocket again, buttoned the pocket and hung his tunic on the upright of the chair. In less than a minute he had crawled into his "flea bag," placed his gas mask within an inch of his face and dropped down on to the miniature pillow.

One of the signallers came in presently with the final weather corrections.

In the far distance a deep rumbling began.

The Major lifted his head and listened. "Warming up for the push, I suppose," he muttered.

"H'm!" Tom's hand went out and he moved a knight. "Check to your queen!" he said.

The rumbling continued, a steady barrage. Away to the north trenches were being plastered flat, and in the broken darkness fear and death went hand in hand.

But beyond the trembling of the candle flame in the cellar, that distant war was without effect. The battlefield of the chess board was the more enthralling: Tom, chin on hand, intent; the Major, legs crossed,

leaning forward, little trickles of smoke exuding from his nostrils; and on the bunks two motionless figures, breathing deeply in sleep.

An hour went by in attack and counter-attack.

At last Tom leaned back with a laugh. "That's torn it!" he said. "I resign. If you'd only moved the pawn instead of the king, I could have got through with rook's pawn."

The Major leaned back and stretched. "I'm a proud man!" he said. "This is only about the third game I've succeeded in taking from you."

"Feel like another?"

The Major laughed and shook his head. "You're insatiable! No, we've got a busy day in front of us. We'd better turn in."

Tom glanced at his watch, wound it, gave a prodigious yawn. "It is latish!" he said. "But we sha'n't get another game for quite a while."

"It would be rather good," said the Major thoughtfully, "if our next were on the other side of the Hindenburg Line."

The pieces rattled as Tom tumbled them into the box. He looked at his commanding officer with a questioning eye. "Do you really think there's a chance?"

The Major shrugged his shoulders. "Frankly," he said, "I don't! All I can see is another costly side show, — which of course will be reported as a great victory in order to keep up civilian morale through this winter. Our only chance next year is five million fresh troops, — in other words, America."

"America!" Tom laughed. "We're comic creatures. . . . A mere hundred years ago America gave

us a beautiful licking, and now they're our great hope. Once we were the hereditary enemies of La Belle France, and now look at us! . . . You know, I should like to come through, just to see if fifty million dead will make a big enough dent in our ego to make us change anything."

The Major smiled as he bent over and set about taking off his puttees. "My dear chap," he said, "all of us in the line may change, slightly, but in proportion to the civilian population we're nothing. We don't count. If we're lucky enough to survive, we shall inevitably fall back into the old habits and ways, not only of action, but of thought. Sheer weight of numbers, you know!" He cocked an eye at Tom. "We'll be so busy earning a living that all this war stuff will peel off like old skin, and eventually all we'll remember will be the good times we had. Incidentally," he wound up between grunts as he tugged his snug-kneed breeches over each ankle, "I'm not so sure that, after all, that isn't the saving mercy."

"Perhaps," said Tom, "but I'm not so sure it is. Why should one have to slop back into another aeon of inertia, of moral fatty degeneration? Apparently man is the only animal without pride in himself, and certainly without guts. The only way he succeeds in staggering through life is by lying to himself at every step of the road. All the poetic gush about his nobility, and all the rest of it, is only one of the ways he cheats himself, the purest eyewash! . . . Oh, well. . . . You want to sleep, and I don't blame you. I'll just go up and see how the war's getting on. Goodnight!"

He went up the cellar steps two at a time, stood for

a moment looking north, listening to the rumble and watching the gun-made lightning flicker across the sky. Over at the gun position could be heard the footsteps of the guard, walking up and down to keep himself warm, and also to prevent himself from going to sleep. The stars had come out, and a timid moon peeped from behind a cloud, "as though," thought Tom, with a little smile, "in dismay at the mess we've made."

By the time he went down again, the Major had turned in. The only sound was the regular breathing of the three men on their wire bunks. Tom shuffled quietly over the straw, took off his boots, dropped his tunic on the chair, rolled up in a blanket, blew out the last candle and stretched himself out on the next bunk to Jack. For a moment he looked at him. Poor old lad, he thought. It's a hell of a life to come back to, but it helps no end to have him around. . . . He yawned again, and his eyes closed.

Outside, the moon crept higher.

None of the four men was awakened by the sound of shells dropping on the infantry trenches in the battery's sector. But presently the telephone in the signallers' half of the cellar began a syncopated buzzing. There was a rustle on the ration box out there, acknowledgment; and then the signaller came hurrying across the straw, electric torch in hand. He reached in and shook Tom's shoulder.

"Yes?" said Tom.

"Infantry retaliation, sir!"

Tom kicked off his blanket. The signaller held out a piece of paper with the map indication of the target the infantry wanted him to shell. Tom went to the

table and, by the light of the torch, worked out angle and range on the battery's fighting map. He gave them to the signaller. "Left section," he said. "To report ready when I come over. Lend me the torch."

"Very good, sir."

The signaller returned to his instrument and began buzzing the left section.

Tom jerked on his boots, laced them anyhow, grabbed a tunic, and was halfway up the steps before he had got more than one arm into it. He buttoned it as he ran, heard quick movement, orders, curses, and the slamming of breech blocks at the two left-hand guns.

"Number Five ready, sir!"

"Number Six ready, sir!"

Tom gave the order. "Five rounds, gunfire!"

The two guns smashed the silence into torturing fragments of noise, sharp and hard, that split one's eardrums like bayonet stabs. The gunners, practiced, imperturbable, unloaded and reloaded as though it were all one motion.

Tom's hand went to his breast pocket for his cigarette case. Instead of touching cold metal, his fingers closed on leather. . . . What the . . . He pulled it out. A flat case. He flipped it open. The circle of light from his torch picked out the face of Molly — Molly sitting on a bank of grass — smiling up at him! . . .

With a gasp, he took his thumb at last off the electric button.

The guns were silent, waiting.

"All fired, sir!"

"Repeat!" snapped Tom. It was Jack's tunic! . . . Had he forgotten? Molly trembled in his hand.

He held himself till the guns had accomplished their task. Then he said, "All right! Stand down!" and in a fever of hurry strode back in the direction of the cellar. . . . She hadn't written, but she'd sent him her photograph, herself, and all that damned senseless fussing which he had been indulging in was made idiotic, imbecile, old hen stuff! . . . He stopped, flicked on the torch again. . . . Molly! Was there anybody like her in the world? Just look at her, at those eyes, alight, understanding! . . . Perhaps she had written something on the back. . . . Of course! What was it? He put the torch nearer. "Keep me with you, always, and I'll try and keep you safe." How infinitely sweet! Only a woman could think a thing like that, — and a woman who was in love! There was just that glorious touch of ego in it, of monopoly, that kept the world at arm's length, that refused to admit the war. . . . He smiled. Obviously those scrappy letters, which had become fewer and fewer and finally stopped altogether, did not mean that she had changed. They simply meant that she was not by nature a writer of letters. They were not her medium of expression, that was all, — to say nothing of the fact that she was probably being worked to death driving that ambulance. But "keep me with you, always" more than made up for it. She was thinking about him as she bumped along the roads, — just as he thought about her up the chimney or doing liaison with the infantry or eating bully beef in the cellar: spinning a web of thought around each other as they went on with the job in hand! . . . What an abject apology he owed her! He had begun to doubt, like a fool,

and simply because he hadn't brains enough to think out what lay behind her silence! He had been hungry for words, not realising — idiot that he was! — that thoughts were even more precious. Keep me with you always! — How else but in thought? It was as obvious as a star shell, now, blindingly clear . . .

Standing there surrounded by charred tree stumps and shell holes, he suddenly gave a great laugh, and walked on, light, springy, as though his feet were unconscious of the ground, now that an invisible load had dropped from him.

What on earth had made Jack forget to give him the photograph? Where had his mind been when he asked him if he had brought anything else besides the packet from Mother? . . . Gosh, how he'd pull his leg in the morning! Presumably, if he hadn't found it by the merest accident, the photograph might have remained tucked in Jack's pocket for days, the thoughtless blighter! Wait till he came down from the chimney to-morrow! . . .

There was still a smile of great content on his face as he dropped down the cellar steps once more. He put the torch on the table and groped his way to the chair and hung Jack's tunic on it. Molly's photograph he took with him to the bunk, and put it under his pillow. Then he rolled up in the blanket again and lay down beside his sleeping brother.

Chapter Nine

THE archway of the cellar became a frame for a luminous greyness. The outline of the two bottom steps was visible, although the interior of the cellar was still in black darkness. A man came down, struck a match and lit one of the candles. Then he went to the bunks and shook Jack firmly.

"Six o'clock, sir!" he said.

Jack grunted, sat up, blinked.

The man left the cellar again, returning in two or three minutes with a thick mug of steaming tea, two slices of bread and a fried canteen egg on a plate. He put these on the table and fetched salt, sugar, butter, and a knife and fork from the mess box.

Jack paused in the buttoning of his breeches to pick up the mug and imbibe a swig of the hot drink. When he sat down, dressed, at the table and began to eat, the man groped in the still warm "flea bag," produced field glasses, tin hat and gas mask, and put them within arm's reach of Jack.

"There's some tobacco in my haversack," said Jack. "Just fill up my pouch, will you?" He took the pouch out of his pocket and passed it over. "Is there any more tea?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank God! . . . The signaller had his breakfast?"

"Having it now, sir."

While the "batman" went out to get another mug of tea, Jack went over to the mess box and brought over a tin of marmalade. He spread a thick layer of it over the second slice of bread. By the time the man came back, he had eaten it, lit a pipe, buckled on his belt, and was all ready in an overcoat with a gas mask adjusted around his neck. He drank the tea standing, alternating mouthfuls of liquid with lungfuls of smoke. Finally he put the empty mug down. "Great stuff!" he said, and stumped up the cellar steps.

As he reached the top, a signaller took a cigarette out of his mouth with one hand and saluted with the other.

Jack touched his tin hat. "Morning, Harper!" he said. He looked around and grunted. "Complete waste of time to climb that chimney. Sha'n't be able to see a yard for at least two hours!"

The air was full of thick mist, the next best thing to real fog. It settled wetly and coldly on their faces and coats as they made their way through the outskirts of the town and along a ghostly paved road, between low-lying fields, that led to a group of factories, at the moment invisible.

The mist began dripping off their tin hats. The only sound was the ominous rumbling which went on, undiminished, to the north. In a few minutes they came to the factories, from the shelled ruins of which still sprouted a growth of tall chimneys. The two men picked their steps round and over masses of débris and presently went in through a small door at the base of one of the chimneys.

In the interior darkness, Jack leading, they began

to climb from rung to rung up a series of iron bars that ascended spirally. Away at the top was a patch of light, the size of a playing card. To get there it was necessary to lean out to the right, feel for the bar above, haul yourself up, get steady, and then reach out again for the next, — until at last your head bumped into a wooden platform, and you squeezed through an open trap door into a sort of circular room, where there were wires by which the telephonist could get in touch with the battery again. You left him there and wrenched yourself through another trap into the room above, where holes, each the size of a single brick, had been tunneled into the wall of the chimney at the four points of the compass, and a crossbeam of wood fixed so that you could sit on it and look out.

When the light was good, it was almost like being up in an aeroplane. The earth below was a patchwork quilt, worn and scratched, with trenches zigzagging opposite each other in two rough lines, the rusty, barbed wire of No Man's Land in between. Here and there a spinney of ragged trees stuck up, like those of a miniature Japanese garden in a bowl. And by day nothing ever moved as far as the eye could reach. It was one vast desolation, changed only when shells burst out there, and the smoke drifted with the wind and disappeared.

Jack perched on the crossbeam and looked out. Then he opened the logbook, fumbled with stiff fingers in his overcoat pocket, found the stub of a pencil and wrote: "6.25 a.m. Visibility nil."

He turned up his coat collar. It was too cold to be able to go to sleep again. He started another pipe,

beat his feet against one another, blew on his fingers. . . . How damned unintelligent it was to have to strafe up the blasted chimney at this hour, when you could never begin to see anything until after nine o'clock. Those Brass Hats back there! . . . He turned to the back of the logbook and tore out a page, picked up the pencil again and leaned over.

"My darling Molly," he wrote, "it feels like two years since I saw you, instead of two days. Like the fog outside, war settles on you like a cloud, eats into your bones. Now that I'm back, it seems as though I'd never been away. But for you . . ."

He broke off, undid the top button of his overcoat in order to take out her photograph. . . .

In another moment every button was undone. He stood up, anguish in his eyes, and went frantically through every pocket. He remembered distinctly buttoning it into the breast pocket of his tunic the last thing. Where in the name of . . .

"Harper!"

The signaller's voice came up. "Yes, sir?"

"Who's on the other end?"

"Jones, sir."

"Get him on the wire and tell him to go into the mess and look around for a photograph in a leather case. It ought to be lying by the chair where we put our clothes. Tell him to hurry!"

"Very good, sir." There was a rapid buzzing, and then Harper's voice again. "Bill? . . . Mr. Ingleside wants yer to go into the mess and see if there's a photo layin' by the chair where they 'angs their clothes. It's in a leather case, 'e says. Go on. 'Op on to it!"

Jack passed a hand over his face. It rasped on his beard. Curse that man Jones. Why didn't he hurry?

"What's that? . . . All right. . . . 'E says it ain't there, sir!"

"Damn it! It's got to be there! Tell Jones to get McLeod. I'll talk to him myself."

After another interminable period, the telephonist poked the instrument up through the trap. " 'E's on now, sir!"

There wasn't sufficient length of wire to let him take the 'phone into the look-out floor, so Jack crouched over and used the receiver and microphone while the signaller held the instrument up at arm's length from below.

"That you, McLeod? . . . Look here, I've lost a photo in a leather case. I'm certain it was in my tunic pocket last night, but now it's gone. Look around, will you, now, before the others wake up. If it isn't on the floor anywhere, hunt through my kit to see if by any possible chance I may have put it there. Call me back right away. And for God's sake, find it! It's desperately important!"

It wasn't the slightest comfort to think that he could write to her and get another. He wanted that particular photograph, because it was the one she had given him herself, the one that was impregnated with the emotions of their great moment. If she were to lose the ring, he could get her another, but it would never be quite the same. . . . That idiot Jones was probably half asleep when he went blundering in to look, and equally probably scared to death that the Major might wake up and ask him what he was doing there. McLeod would find it right off the reel. He

was a smart kid, McLeod, with a head on him. . . . All the same, it was extraordinary. He had consciously and deliberately buttoned that pocket last night. Even if the tunic had dropped off the chair during the night, the photo couldn't possibly have come out. And to-morrow they might be in the push! He'd simply got to have it for that, otherwise . . . well, he might not be so lucky. You never could tell. You might . . . stop something if it wasn't there.

The 'phone buzzed. There was McLeod now. "What does he say?"

" 'E says it ain't nowhere on the floor, sir, or on the chair, and 'e can't find it in your kit. 'E thinks it must be in your pocket."

Did McLeod take him for a fool? He had been through every pocket twice. Was it under the straw, or down in the bunk? You could never trust anybody to do a thorough job for you. You had to do it yourself. If only he wasn't stuck up this blasted chimney till midday. . . . However, if they were going to pull out of the line to-morrow, the cellar would be stripped, and then it simply must turn up.

The rolling back of the mist and the gradual unveiling of the bleak landscape below touched only a secondary awareness in Jack. The habit of duty kept him staring out through the hole watching for enemy movement, which did not occur; but within he was swinging from the peak of hope to the abyss of discouragement.

Without his having realised the full extent of it, the gift of Molly had worked a subtle change in him. He was no longer the same man who had walked through the barrage to see if Mason were all right.

Then, he was a unit, unattached, facing alone the various phenomena of the firing line. It was up to him to survive or be killed, according to his obedience to instincts whose dictates were of him and for him alone. Now he had added a woman to himself, a glimpse of a future so supremely desirable that the full danger of the present became doubled. He was no longer the "young unmarried man without ties" advertised for by the government. Molly was a tie. Merely to live on was doubly a tie, now that it was for her too. Hitherto he had always said, with a laugh, that the best protection for an artilleryman against enemy shells was a blade of grass in the open. It had been true, before. But that phase of soldiering was over. Without fully admitting it to himself, he knew that he was going to be "careful." He wasn't going to take any more fool chances. If there was a deep trench, he was going to use it, the deeper the better. After all, you never knew where one of the damned things might drop. . . .

As he sat there in the chimney, the loss of the photograph, coming on top of this change in him, assumed the proportions of tragedy. He tried to curse himself out of it, to ridicule himself out of it, but the feeling remained that the photograph really carried protection, that with it was some aura of Molly, of her love, which would help him through. To have lost it was almost an omen of . . . of . . .

The vision of Mason's legs made him shiver.

Chapter Ten

A FEW minutes after midday, when Wickham had taken his place at the top of the chimney, Jack came around the corner of the street at high speed, intent only on searching the cellar from top to bottom. But standing at the entrance was a group of officers, — a General, the Colonel, the Adjutant, another Staff officer, the Major, Tom.

"Damn!" muttered Jack. "Some idiotic inspection, I suppose!"

As he came up, the General's eye took him in coldly, as though looking at another rifle suddenly added to a row of rifles.

"Is this one of your officers, Major Bradford?" he asked, in a high voice.

"Yes, sir," said the Major.

Jack saluted and attempted to pass on.

Again the high voice. "Wait a minute, you! What's your name?"

Jack stopped, looked the General squarely in the eye. "Ingleside, sir."

The General glanced at Tom. "Oh!" he said. "Brothers?"

"Yes, sir."

The General looked back at Jack. "Why aren't you shaved? Do you know that it's after midday? You look absolutely disreputable!"

The Major tapped the ash from his cigarette.

"He's been on duty in the observation post since six o'clock, sir," he put in quietly.

The General swung round. "That isn't any excuse! You know, as well as I do, that it's a very bad example to the troops to have any officer looking like that."

The Major smiled. "Too bad you didn't come round a week ago, sir, when there was a war on! You wouldn't have found any of us bothering very much with shaving. I developed quite a remarkable growth myself! But, all the same, I don't think you would have been able to find any fault with the accuracy of our shooting!"

A smile flickered round the eyes of the Adjutant. The Colonel tugged his moustache nervously.

Before the General could find anything to say, the Major went on. "Perhaps you don't know, sir, that conditions here in the line are extremely variable. It's almost impossible to calculate twenty-four hours ahead, and so we have to adjust ourselves to situations as they arise. In spite of his hirsute appearance, Mr. Ingleside is a very good officer. I might add that both of them are recommended for Captain. . . . However, I wonder if you'd be able to spare the time to drop down into the mess and have a drink? We have a bottle of very good Scotch . . ."

The Adjutant's smile became a grin. The other Staff officer coughed loudly. "I think, sir," he said to the General, "we'd better be getting along. You have a luncheon appointment with General Barclay at one, and . . ."

"Quite so! Quite so!" said the General. "Er, time waits for no man! Well . . . Good morning, Major Bradford. You'll come with us to the car, Colonel?"

The Major, Tom and Jack saluted.

The General nodded and led the way with his staff officer and the Colonel down the street.

The Adjutant lingered for a moment. He shot a wink at the Major, and, from behind his hand, muttered, "That's the stuff to give 'em!" Then he followed quickly after the glittering party.

There was a gleam in the Major's eyes as he went down the cellar steps.

Tom looked at Jack with a broad grin. "Absolutely disreputable! Entirely unfit for the rarefied atmosphere of the back areas!"

Jack grunted. "Damned old fossil! Why don't they stay in their Channel ports and leave us in peace up here?"

"Because little subalterns must have their little noses rubbed in it!" laughed Tom. "He cursed me for being around the guns without a tin hat! Asked me how long I'd been out, and made me go back and get it!"

Jack threw up his hands. "Pity they didn't drop a few shells while he was here. They have a genius for appearing when there's nothing doing. Well . . . I'll go and scrape off the offensive beard."

"You'd better! Incidentally, shaving's not the only thing you forgot, you blighter!"

Jack looked puzzled. "What's the trouble?"

Tom's eyes twinkled. "Doesn't your sluggish memory stir even now?"

"I haven't the faintest idea of what you're burbling about," said Jack. "You'd better produce the crime sheet."

" 'How long, O Lord, how long!' " murmured

Tom. He produced his cigarette case and held it out. Jack shook his head. As he went on speaking, Tom tapped a cigarette on the case and lit it. "I suppose you've forgotten that you went on leave?"

"Almost!" said Jack.

Tom gave a laugh. "Gosh, I suppose that's true! . . . Well, anyhow, let me remind you that you came back yesterday. And when you gave me the packet from Mother, I asked you if there was anything else. . . . D' you get it now?"

What was all this? It seemed to Jack that all his muscles began to tighten. His eyes narrowed.

At the change in his brother's face, Tom's serene whimsical expression deepened. "At last!" he said. "I see something beginning to work. The aphasia is lifting! . . . All the same, I wonder how long you'd have gone strolling round this battery without giving it to me? I suppose if there hadn't been a shoot last night, I might have had to wait a month! Honestly, old lad, it was pretty damned careless of you! It's all right now, because I've got it, but I really should have been a bit mad if you'd gone on forgetting!"

A shoot last night. . . . Careless. . . . Forgetting what? . . . It meant nothing, and yet apprehension filled him. "You're talking Greek," said Jack. "I didn't forget anything!"

It was Tom's turn to stare. He did so, and then gave a queer laugh in which there was a touch of impatience. It wasn't like Jack to miss his cues! "Well, for heaven's sake! . . . Don't you call this forgetting?" He drew the photograph out of his pocket and held it out.

Jack's eyes went wide. "Ah! Thank God!" He

took it, almost snatched it, in his eagerness, and held it behind him. "Where did you find it?" The relief and delight in the fact that it was not lost made him forget everything else.

But Tom's eyebrows went up as he saw Jack's movement with the photograph. "Hi!" he said. "No tricks now! Give that back!"

"Give it back?" echoed Jack, in vast surprise. And then suddenly the full realisation of what had happened shot through him. "God!" he muttered, his face white. "I . . . I'm sorry, old man! I can't!" he said.

Tom held out his hand. "Oh, rats! Don't be an idiot!"

Jack shook his head. "It . . . it was not for you."

Tom laughed. "Not for me? How priceless! Why, you fathead . . ."

Then something in Jack's face made the laugh die away. . . . Would the photograph have been naked like that? Wouldn't it have been done up in paper. . . . He took a step forward, his eyes searching his brother's face. "Not for me?"

"No."

"What do you mean? Who else could it be for?"

"Me," said Jack.

It seemed as if a whole life ticked off between them.

Tom stood staring, his brain a kaleidoscope. The cigarette dropped from his fingers . . . Then, those scrappy letters . . . What had been going on all this time?

Jack caught him by the arm. "Tom, old man . . ."

Tom shook off the hand. There was something here he had to grasp. "Wait a minute! . . . You mean that you . . . that Molly has . . ." He

stopped with a gasp. "Damn it, I don't believe it! You're lying!" He seized his brother by the lapels of his coat and shook him savagely. "Go on, take it back! Unsay it! D' you hear! . . ."

At the anguish in Jack's eyes, his hands dropped. So it was true! He had grasped it. It was all a washout. Somehow Jack had wormed his way in and she had chucked him. . . . Spinning a web of thought around him as she bumped along the roads, eh? God! And all the time she had chucked him! Weeks ago? Months? What did it matter when? She had chucked him! And he had thought it was a matter of brains to read through her silence! She must have been writing to Jack all the time. . . . "Keep me with you!" God, they had fooled him! Utterly and completely! Brains? How the . . . Jack, of all men!

"I'm frightfully sorry!" said Jack. "If there's anything in the world I could do . . ."

Tom looked up at him with a bitter laugh. "That's right! Now rub it in! How long did it take you to work it?" . . . That hurt! He could see that it hurt. Do it again! Everybody had got to get hurt in this bloody life. "It would be rather interesting to know just when you decided to undertake the campaign, — there must have been a campaign! These things don't simply fall into one's lap."

"Oh, please!" said Jack. "I give you my word there's nothing of that in it. The whole thing's a . . . a sort of accident, a misunderstanding."

Misunderstanding? It was as clear as a star shell, now. She had chucked him, and Jack had chucked him too. . . . Somehow, that was the last straw. It was so unnecessary, so needlessly damnable, that it

should have to be Jack. That was like selling out, going over and fighting for the enemy. One might have been able to stand up and take it, somehow, if it hadn't been Jack. . . . But now. . . . Oh, God! . . . "I don't know how you worked it and I don't ever want to know," he said. "All I understand thoroughly is that it's a filthy, dirty trick, and I wish you joy of it!" He turned on his heel, digging his fists into his pockets. They were safer there.

In two strides Jack caught up with him. "Look here, you've got to let me tell you!"

Tom didn't even hear him. He was gone already, reaching out in his mind for some way of comprehension, of acceptance. But he became conscious that Jack was at him again, nagging him, pursuing him, — like a damned mosquito. "Get away from me!" he said. "Leave me alone!"

"For God's sake, listen!" said Jack.

Tom swung round on him, eyes blazing. "You've done your bit. Now go to hell!"

Every word was bitten off, deadly quiet, impregnated with finality. They went in deeper than fists. Then Tom flung away, striding quickly.

And with the photograph of Molly still clasped in his hand, Jack was left standing in the shelled road.

Chapter Eleven

THE Adjutant's office was a room which boasted a fireplace and a window. As it faced away from the line, the window was not sandbagged; but, as smoke could be seen during the day, the fire was only lit at night. Then the Colonel and the other headquarters officers gathered round it and played bridge, — to the envy of the four battery commanders, who had to pig it in their various dugouts near the guns.

A smell of fried bully beef and cabbage pervaded the chateau.

The Adjutant sat at his desk. He was examining a German fuse and whistling loudly the air of that sentimental ballad, "I've just had a letter from Mother dear."

Suddenly the door was pushed open and a voice said, "Hullo, Adj!"

He looked round and grinned. "Hullo, Ingleside! See you've got the tin hat still on! That old bastard of a General lived up to his reputation, didn't he? But your man Bradford's a smooth bird! It was a sweet performance he gave this morning."

Tom nodded. "Yes, but listen. I want to go down to Boulogne, now, immediately. Can you fix it?"

The Adjutant threw back his head and roared. "Why don't you say you'd like a trip to Bermuda?"

"I can be back in forty-eight hours," said Tom.

"Ah, ha! I know! I could do with a bit myself!

Hell, in this bloody place the nearest thing to a woman . . ."

Tom leaned on the table with both hands. "No, it's nothing so simple as that. It's . . . urgent private affairs. Family stuff. Go ahead now, like a good chap, and write me a leave warrant!"

"You're cock-eyed!" said the Adjutant. "We pull out to-morrow for the push!"

"Oh, curse the push!" said Tom. "I can get back to Cambrai in time for that. All I want is a few hours in Boulogne."

The Adjutant shook his head. "Sorry, old thing! It isn't even worth asking the Colonel. He can't do anything. Everything's stopped, — leave, courses, transfers, the whole shoot! You'll have to wait till after the show."

"God damn the show!" Tom wrenched around and made for the door.

"Amen to that!" said the Adjutant. "Stop and have some lunch!"

There was no answer, except the slamming of the door.

The Adjutant shrugged his shoulders, pursed up his lips and began again, "I've just had a letter from Mother dear. . . ."

"Hullo there!" The Major stopped his bicycle and dismounted.

"Where on earth have you been hiding? I wanted to send you down to the wagon line and nobody knew where you were."

"Sorry!" said Tom. "I went along to brigade. Shall I go down now?"

"Yes, but you'd better get something to eat first."

"That's all right," said Tom. "I'm not hungry. What do you want done down there?"

"I want you to take charge," said the Major. "The Captain's not due to arrive back till the day after to-morrow, and he'll probably get lost in the shuffle. Here's a list of spare parts for the guns which I've got from the fitter. Chase the quartermaster down to Ordnance this afternoon. We've got to have them! If necessary, go yourself. . . . Anything wrong? You look a little groggy."

Tom looked up quickly and away again. . . . This damn feller saw everything. Must take cover, quick. "Oh . . . no, thanks! I'm fed up, that's all. D' you think you could get me a transfer to the Flying Corps, or the Tanks, or something?"

The Major was watching him. "What's it all about?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing!" said Tom. "I . . . I'd like a change, that's all."

"Oh! I see," said the Major. "Well, let's talk about it after the push. Perhaps a couple of days in the wagon line . . ."

Tom jerked his head back. "This blasted push!" He flung his leg over the bicycle. "All right, sir! I'll get along down."

Chapter Twelve

"Darling Molly,

"If I can get this out to-night it may reach you eventually, and I want it to frightfully. I'm sitting under a tree, waiting. We're all waiting. The quiet is appalling. You see, the Royal Garden Party comes off to-morrow — you know! It's the biggest thing of its kind we've ever been in. We've been working for it for three days and nights, and we're absolutely all in. If you could only see the garden! And what's more, we're right in the front seats.

"If I weren't writing to you, I don't think I could stick it. This waiting is getting on my nerves. My stomach's just one tight knot. If only the damned party would begin!

"I've been keeping you with me, not only in my pocket, but in my thoughts and my soul, clinging to you, my dear, like a kid, — to be bone honest, like a frightened kid. There's no reason why I should try and hide it from you. It helps to say it to you, to get it off my chest. I want to come through to-morrow. I've got to see you again, to feel your arms round me, to know that you really love me. The mere idea of anything else chokes me, makes me shake all over. Molly! My darling, if you only knew how I love you! You're the reason why I was born, and if anything stops me from getting back to you, then life is nothing but a damned swindle, a ghastly lie! I don't care now about

all those other things which used to seem so important — making a name and all that silly rot. That's for the people who haven't found out. It's the same with all this stuff out here, which doesn't mean anything either. The only reality is you, to creep off into some corner with you and never come out.

"One thing I hate to tell you, but I've got to, is that Tom knows. I wonder if you could possibly write him something that would help? He's most frightfully cut up. It makes me sweat blood to see him. He has avoided me for three days, won't come near me, or look at me, or open his mouth. The Major told me he'd asked for a transfer to the Flying Corps, and asked me if I knew why! It's to get away from me! I've tried to break it down in all sorts of ways, but every time he looks right through me as if I weren't there. It has hurt him badly. He wouldn't let me tell him the truth about it, and the result is that he's convinced I've played some incredibly dirty trick in order to get you. I tried writing him a letter in which I put the whole thing. But as soon as he saw my writing, he tore it up and trod on it, without reading a word. He hates me. I can feel it every time he's anywhere near. It's perfectly ghastly. You know how Tom and I have worked together. There's never been another man on earth to touch him. Out here I don't see how I could have stuck it as long as this if it hadn't been for him, and now he thinks I'm . . . The Major's yelling for me. I love you.

"JACK."

Chapter Thirteen

THE stirring of brown bundles. Men getting to their feet, shivering.

It's show day! Jack stood up on the damp ground and shook himself. Dawn — with clothes all prickly, and mugs of tea conjured out of nowhere by those blessed servants. Mist, blankets of it, penetratingly cold. Horses blowing, and the lumbering rattle of limbers and ammunition wagons coming up. Drivers dismounting, and a sputter of matches as cigarettes are lit all down the line.

Waiting, subdued talk, moving aimlessly, to keep warm, to keep from thinking of what is going to happen. . . . If they open fire on us now, they'll get the entire battery!

The sound of a thousand steam rollers, grinding and clanging: the horses' heads all coming up as one, ears pricked. Then a rearing and plunging, with cursing drivers hanging on to the reins, — and a great iron mastodon looming up in the middle of them. The tanks! Each one closely trailed by the poor bloody infantry who are going over the top — and engineers, who are going to make places for the guns to cross the trenches when their turn comes! Their turn . . .

Heart pounding almost as loudly as the tanks. Can't swallow any more — throat all dry. Frightful

feeling of nausea. . . . In a few minutes, zero hour. . . . God!

If only Tom . . . Pipe stem rattling against your teeth. Bite it, man! Bite it! . . . Listen! Bursts of machine-gun fire. Bombs. They're there!

Still waiting. Always this bloody waiting! Imagination tearing through the mist. . . . The tanks must be dragging swathes of barbed wire, spitting flames and bullets. Germans running, with their hands up, running blindly. . . . German machine gunners, their weapons red-hot, bombs dropping into the middle of them, smashed faces, limbs, agony, death. . . . Death everywhere, the reek of it!

"Get mounted!"

We're going into it. . . . It isn't true! They can't send us. . . . A saddle under you. "Come up, damn you!" with a savage jerk on the brute's mouth. . . . The battery going forward at a walk, the Major up there in the lead. Thank God for the Major! He'll pull us through this, if anybody can. . . . If only Tom. . . . Have I got her photo all right? . . . God's truth, look at that! Grey bundles huddled in the trench. Tommies lying on their faces. They might be asleep. Is that death? How easy! It's only the getting there. . . . In hell here a second ago and then — nothing. . . . That's where the tank went through. The trench all smeared up. . . . God, there they are! Revolver out, quick! Oh, only the poor damned prisoners being marched back, their faces almost green. . . . Why, they're kids, most of them. Schoolboys! What a God-damned shame! Children! Christ, we've all gone mad! Why doesn't the earth open up and swallow the whole bloody lot of us! It

would be a good riddance. We're nothing but a lot of . . .

"Halt! Action front! One gun at a time!"

Action! The command was like a wind driving smoke before it. Jack threw his leg over the horse's neck and dropped to the ground with an immensity of relief. One was so damned high up on a horse. There was no chance to take cover if shells began to drop. All you could do was to sit there like a fool. . . . There was Tom, getting the right section into action. If only he . . . So that was the line of fire. Right!

Jack doubled out to a flank, measured off the distance, picked out two flattish places for his own section, and signalled back for the two guns to come up. The sergeants came running.

"Number Five here!" said Jack. "And Number Six just the other side of that stump. D' you see, Sergeant Yates?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Swing your horses round that shell hole, lead driver! . . . That'll do it. Go on! A little more! Right! Halt! Unhook! . . . Now, Sergeant Brown, you can get timber for a platform from those dugouts, and Yates can get his from the trench. I'll get out and mark the line for the aiming posts."

By the time the guns were in line and being manhandled on to their timbered platforms, the Major had established the signallers, the stretcher bearers, the servants and himself in a German dugout that faced the wrong way in the support trench that was behind the guns. Through the distant and continuous din of the attack up forward, work went on with

trained rapidity, — shells piled by the guns as team followed team, wire run out by signallers, instruments connected up with brigade headquarters, the dugout and the observation officer. The battery cook took possession of the fire left alight by the Germans. A fatigue party of a corporal and two men dragged away dead bodies and piled them into a shell hole some distance off. They wouldn't begin to smell for a couple of days, and by that time the battery would have advanced again. Presently Wickham, at the observation post, began to register the guns, and one by one they had their aiming posts corrected and became quiet, while the gunners, ceaseless as brown ants, went on improving the position, — digging a trench behind each piece and erecting a miniature parados of sandbags parallel to each gun wheel.

The Major walked round. "Well," he said, "we're ready. It looks," he added, as he led the way down into the dugout, "as if this break through might come off — with a little luck!"

"Sounds too good to be true!" said Jack. He looked across the dugout at Tom. If only he would come out of that ghastly silence!

But Tom might not even have been listening. He went over to the servants' quarters and yelled, "Hi there, McLeod! Bring on something to eat. Get a move on, for God's sake!"

Chapter Fourteen

NOBODY knew when the change began, when success overreached itself and order degenerated into chaos. There had been an interregnum of another day and a night, when the tiny unit, linked by telephone to its parent body, the brigade, observed the normal rules of behavior, — carrying out firing orders and resupplying itself with ammunition, despite the enemy guns which plastered the whole area, feeding itself at stated intervals, more or less, and regenerating itself with sleep whenever the moment offered a possibility.

What was happening beyond was not their business, except in so far as a voice came over the wire, ordering their coöperation at this or that unseen point, — unseen by every man except the officer whose turn it was to be their eyes somewhere out there in the direction of Germany.

Then, with the unexpectedness of a railway collision, the war came to them.

The three emotional letters S.O.S. were uttered in the dugout as the Major, Tom and Jack were in the act of sitting down to eat. As though personally attached to the electric wire that had carried the message, all three jumped to their feet and were out of the dugout before the last letter had stopped vibrating in their ears.

In his hand, as he leaped from the trench and ran

full speed towards the already-barking guns, Jack clasped his slab of bully beef and a biscuit.

Behind them all, on what had formerly been the German front-line trench, dropped a curtain of shells.

Somewhere on the spouting earth, snapped ends of wires curled a moment and lay still. The battery's eyes and ears were cut off. To all intents and purposes they were deaf and blind, until the men sent out could find and join those wires together again.

Through the shell bursts could be heard ragged rifle fire and the hollow stutter of machine guns.

Not more than half an hour had ticked off on his wrist, when the Major, standing on top of the trench, field glasses to his eyes, gave an exclamation, turned and barked an order.

"McLeod! Sloan! Everybody out with rifles! Double! . . . Signaller! . . . Take this to Mr. Ingleside, right section!" He began to write on the leaf of a pocketbook. "Enemy infantry. Open sights. Shrapnel. 1500 yards. Sweep four degrees."

As the signaller ran out, the Major's glasses came up again. Calm-eyed he watched the rapidly growing khaki figures of straggling infantry, behind whom advanced a broken wave of field grey, — coming steadily forward in groups of two and three, disappearing behind a fold in the ground, reappearing again a little nearer each time. . . . Was there a chance of saving his guns? It didn't look like it. All the same, if those stragglers hadn't panicked, there might be a chance to man the trench and hold on with rifles until relief could come up from behind, or until . . . The Major's face took on an expression half of questioning, half of amusement. . . . Well, evo-

lution would go on, anyway, and this was such small beer.

The men came tumbling out. He began to station them at five-yard intervals, gave orders to set sights at five hundred yards, not to open fire until he gave them the signal. As he went up and down the top of the trench, he laughed and joked with each man, stopped once, intentionally, and lit a cigarette with the same casualness that he would have used if they had all been in a quiet rest billet, miles away from it all.

The signaller with his written message went dashing over to where Tom was on one knee behind his guns.

At the opposite end of the battery Jack was wiping his hands on the seat of his breeches, having gulped down the last mouthfuls of food. He was standing up, watching the firing. Just as he reached into his pocket for a pipe, his eye went over the top of the gun shield and fell on the thin line of stragglers, went beyond to the first groups of German infantry. With a single leap he caught the nearest sergeant by the arm, yelled to him to cease fire. "Boches advancing in front! Open sights. Fifteen hundred. Shrapnel! Check your fuses!"

He gave the same order to the next gun and started along at top speed to warn Tom. Here was his chance!

But the signaller had already reached him and was doubling back to the trench. Tom was in full process of getting the right and centre sections on to the new firing orders.

Jack stopped. There was nothing to tell Tom now.

As the orders came down from gun to gun, he looked back at the trench. There was the Major. He was catching stragglers and making them get down into the trench and take a position with the gunners. . . . What the hell was his idea?

Another signaller came running out. He went first to Tom, then came on to Jack. The message read. "When you hear my whistle, remove and bury breech blocks. Double back to trench with all gunners. We'll try and hold with rifle fire."

Bury breech blocks! Render the guns useless! It was the end of all things! And Wickham, who had been out there observing? He must be either dead or a prisoner! Was it only a matter of minutes when they would all be dead or prisoners? God, no! It was unthinkable! In a fury of revolt, Jack gave the new order to each of the sergeants, and then, with a pounding heart, watched those elusive blobs of grey who seemed to come nearer with every round that was fired. Might as well try to bring down a thousand pheasants single-handed! If only they could hit 'em with these eighteen-pounders! But the damned shell bursts didn't seem to make the slightest difference. They dropped flat and got up again and came walking on as if there weren't any guns. You could see their rifles now, and every group was lugging a machine gun. . . . God, if they started enfilading from a flank. . . .

Suddenly the shrill blast of a whistle cut through the barking of the battery.

Jack leaped to his feet. "Cease fire! Breech blocks!"

In the trench rifles began to pop.

"Hurry up there! Back to the trench as soon as your block's buried!"

So long as there had been guns to fire, Jack had been upheld by the need, the habit, of performance, by the mere sustaining fact that they were doing something to help themselves. But with the rattle of the heavy breech blocks as they were taken out and dropped with a thud into the nearest shell hole and covered over with earth, the most utter helplessness swept over him. They were out of action, unarmed, stripped, without a chance, like rabbits. . . . The trench was a hell of a way off and there was nothing on earth to save them from being picked off as they ran across the open — shot through the back! . . . He could feel his flesh creep under his tunic, and dropped on one knee again while the men finished with the breech blocks. Why were they so damned slow! You'd think they'd got all day! . . . Was Tom all right over there? Yes, he'd got one section away already. They were streaming across the open, and Tom was waiting for the rest. Of course! . . . Jack took a deep breath. Well, he'd wait for Tom. He wasn't going to let Tom be the last man out. They'd run for it together! Even if Tom loathed him, he couldn't prevent him from keeping pace with him on his own side of the battery. . . . Thank God, Brown was away. Get a move on, Yates! Hurry for the love of — God, what's that? A machine gun in action! Christ, it's all over! We're done for! Get on there, Yates, you bloody fool! That's right, run! Run like hell! The trench! Oh, God, to get to the trench! . . . Tom! Come on, Tom! Get 'em out! Ah, there he goes at last! Now . . .

Tom was running, all his men away.

As though a ball and chain had been cut from his feet, Jack leaped after his own men, who were halfway across, strung out in an irregular line, — that flat-footed blighter Gunner Smith the last man, as usual! Damn him, he was always late on everything! . . . Where was Tom? Ahead, thank God! . . . Jack spurted. In ten strides he was up with the gunner. "Damn you, Smith! Run faster! What the hell do you think you're playing at? Run, man!"

The lumbering gunner half turned his head. "I ain't no perishin' run — "

The words suddenly changed to a cough. He flopped sideways, rolled over and lay still.

In thirty more strides they could have been in the trench, safe, under cover from those bullets that spat on the ground and ricochetted like angry hornets.

Thirty strides! Jack took two before he could stop himself. It wasn't any good. You couldn't leave Smith lying out there. . . . He turned and plunged back to the man, got a good grip and heaved him up over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Then he began to run on again, heavily, his breath coming in gasps. The trench had become a mile away and he was moving like a snail! God, why had the fellow stopped a bullet now? Just the sort of thing he would do! . . . Was Tom in? Yes, he must be now. Wasn't any question who'd be last man to —

The men in the trench saw Jack suddenly pivot and crash, as though a giant had laid an invisible hand on his shoulder and flung him to the ground.

The infantry stragglers under the Major were trying to pick off the German machine gunners.

As Jack crashed, Tom clambered out of the trench and ran, silent, white-faced, desperate, across the bullet-swept area towards his brother.

Out there in the open one of Jack's arms was moving. His other hand still held the inert gunner by the tunic. His body humped, moved forward an inch, sagged again. Through the shadows that were closing in on him, he was muttering incoherently. " 'S too thick . . . treacle. Oughtn't swum out. . . . so far. Let's yell . . . old Meuvret. . . ." Then, from some world a million miles away, it seemed that his own name in Tom's infinitesimal voice was trying to get through to him . . . reached him. Jack sighed deeply. "Good old Tom!" His face went down on the ground as though it were a pillow. The arm stopped swimming.

Chapter Fifteen

THE deep rumble of traffic, punctured by the sharp hoots of automobile horns in many keys, swelled and lulled through the open windows of the ward.

A million offices opened their doors and poured as many girls into subways and buses; all the theatres and music halls were crowded; the dance floors oscillated with stickily coupled multitudes, weaving sinuously, belly to belly, cheek plastered to cheek; restaurants, fœtid with the smell of food and drink, were packed to the doors with other couples, silk thigh pressed to khaki thigh. "Business as usual" was being loyally carried out.

Had the sound of their traffic been that of the sea or of the firing line, however, it would have made little difference to the youthful occupants of the double row of iron cots.

They were engaged in an aspect of life quite apart — a half world, of which the keynote was infinite solitude, produced by unceasing pain. Whole armies might be wiped out, the country for which they had suffered mutilation of body go down in defeat, the man in the next cot die in agony — yet no one individual in the ward would have known, or, knowing, have cared. They were all too deeply engrossed in the most basic, the most egocentric, of all educational processes, the struggle against death.

Many of them failed daily and, behind the sar-

castic privacy of a diminutive screen, stopped, like clocks with broken springs. Then orderlies were notified: "Numbers Fourteen and Twenty-nine, George!" and the unequal bodies were carried out to make room for other young candidates.

Some had succeeded, for the time being, in winning back to a firm clutch on the fringes of life, but, for the most part, they too were still entangled in the meshes of suffering.

The ward had its own traffic and its own sounds, — the rubber-wheeled iron table rolling from bed to bed with its cargo of basins, bandages, swabs, clinking bottles of alcohol dressings; the quick tap of the nurse's shoes on the linoleum; the slower and more solid impact of the feet of the doctor and of shaken visitors; the murmur of their voices; and, always, from one cot or another, the harsh outcry of a soul racked beyond endurance.

As the doctor went from cot to cot, he stopped eventually at one halfway down on the left-hand side. As customary, he refreshed his memory of the case by a glance at the identification card at the head of the bed. It bore the name Ingleside, J., Lieut. R.F.A., with the brief essentials of the history of the case.

"Ah, yes!" he said, and glanced down at the hoop that protected the bandaged legs from the weight of the bedclothes. Then, as he saw that the patient's eyes were open, he smiled, with would-be cheeriness. "Well! How's it coming along? Feel a little easier?"

Jack moved his head a fraction of an inch. With immense effort he forced a small voice. Something red-hot was stabbing him all the way up from the ankles. "Where . . . is this?"

"This," said the doctor, "is St. Charles Hospital, London."

Jack blinked, while the information sank slowly in. It took him all the way back to Cambrai. "God! . . . How long . . . have I been here?"

The doctor glanced at the card again. "Four days, to be exact. Just long enough to pick out all the machine-gun bullets from various parts of you. You got pretty well peppered, young man!"

"Is my . . . brother here?" Jack's voice was urgent.

"Your brother? . . . No. I'm quite sure he's not. Why? Was he wounded too?"

"I don't know. I'm . . . frightfully worried about him. Could you possibly telegraph or something?"

The doctor nodded. "I see!" he said. "Just tell me his Christian name and unit, and I'll do what I can to find out."

Jack's eyes closed. He murmured his brother's name and the number of the brigade.

"Right!" said the doctor. "Now you keep quiet and leave it to me."

Somewhere outside, a gigantic bell tolled six o'clock. It must be Big Ben. . . . If they didn't do something about this pain he'd have to scream in a minute. It was tearing and throbbing, as if raw ends were being twisted and gnawed. His body was nailed down with spikes, crucified to the bed. He tried to ease it by turning his head with infinite caution. It made it worse. If only he could faint, get away from this body, somehow! What was the technique in this damnable hospital game? Did you simply have to lie there and go crazy, or would they, could they, do anything to

stop it if you screamed? . . . Screaming was too hard. It would hurt so frightfully. . . .

For an indefinite time no one came near. Each cot might have been on a separate planet.

At last, in a dry whisper that was meant for a yell, words crept from his lips. "Nurse! . . . Nurse, can't you do something! . . . Oh, please. . . ."

Chapter Sixteen

MOLLY glanced at her wrist watch as she walked down the long hut. Six o'clock! Big Ben would be striking just across the Channel. Lucky people in London! She sighed as she plumped down on her bed. Just an hour in which to write the letter. She'd need every minute of it! Then funny old Gertrude — rather a dear, if she didn't have an "h" in her possession, bless her! — was coming to drag her to the movies in the recreation hut. Oh well, it might help her to stop worrying for an hour!

The sleeping hut held fifty beds. By means of diplomatic wangling, Molly had secured one underneath the window. One needed air with forty-nine other girls snoring and grinding their teeth in chorus. . . . How wonderful it would be to get back to her own bedroom and see the moon come up over the orchard again. . . . All that was a million years ago!

She pulled a suit case from under the bed, unlocked it, and took out Jack's letter.

Although she knew it almost by heart, she read it again, anxiously, cleaving time and space, seeing him sitting there under a tree, with his pipe sticking out of the left side of his mouth and that worried look in his eyes. . . . Had she helped to put it there? She wrung her hands at the thought. . . . She couldn't

follow him after he had finished the letter. Things seemed to close down.

"He wrote it eight days ago," she muttered. "Eight days and they were in the 'front seats'!"

The newspapers had featured it, — the brilliant surprise attack, the break through, the capture of thousands of prisoners, excited adjectives, and flaring headlines: then, more guardedly, the check, the strategic withdrawal somewhat slurred over, and, finally, the announcement that they were holding with only minor losses.

Minor losses! . . . And the General had said that every base hospital was full! Why did they lie so in the newspapers? Did they even manipulate the casualty lists?

Molly bit her lip. Mustn't think of that! . . . She put the letter back into the suit case and took out a writing pad and pencil. It wasn't going to be nearly so hard to write to Tom now that Jack had asked her to do it. It wasn't for herself any more. In a sense she didn't count. If Tom hated her, she deserved it. She had played a rotten game with him, unforgivable! But he mustn't go on hating Jack. That was unthinkable! If she were going to be a barrier between them — if she were going to hurt their feeling for one another . . . no, no! It couldn't be! It mustn't be! If only she could see Tom face to face, tell him . . . She began to write, furiously.

Other girls came into the hut. Some, desperately tired after their day's work, threw themselves full-length on their beds and lay there, heavy, inert. Others gathered in groups, from the thick of which dropped the giggled names of corporals and ser-

geants, — the eternal juxtaposition of Mars and Venus. Molly's share in that problem did not come as easily as she had thought it would. There were so many scratchings out that when, finally, the letter was completed, she had to copy it on another sheet of paper.

Then a large blond girl came bouncing in, made her way down the line of beds with a series of nods and waves to various friends, but did not stop until she reached the next bed to Molly.

" 'Ullo, dearie!" she said. " 'Ere we are again!"

Molly looked up with a preoccupied smile. "Hullo, Gertrude! I'll be ready in three minutes. I've just got to address an envelope for this letter."

Gertrude sat down. "That's all right. Take yer time while I powder me nose. . . . Is 'e a general, or only a pore, bloomin' lieutenant?"

Molly shook her head. "No, this is another kind of letter."

"Ah, go on! You never say nothin', but anybody could tell it wasn't your mother who give you that ring you wear on a chain round your neck, dearie!"

Gertrude grinned as she saw Molly's cheeks flush. She pulled off her hat and began combing her bobbed head. It was the color of ripe corn. Her china-blue eyes were warm and friendly. "What's more," she went on, "I can tell you that 'e only give it you about ten days ago! That's why I asked you whether your taste lays in Brass 'Ats or real soldiers. I'd be willin' to bet 'e wasn't no Brass 'At!"

For many months these two, thrown together by the accident of war, had penetrated beyond the boundaries of grammar and aspirates.

Molly smiled. "You'd win. He's only a lieutenant."

"I knew it. And you're waitin' for the end of the war to get married?"

"Yes," said Molly. She addressed an envelope to Tom, put the letter inside and licked it down.

Gertrude dived under her bed and produced a vanity case. "Ah, well," she said, dabbing powder all over her face, "there's nothin' like 'avin a steady. The boys round this camp only seem to want to fill in time, — love yer to death one minute and on their way up the line the next. It's not my idea! 'Course you can 'ave a lovely time and all, but careful does it, I sez! A girl's a fool what'd get into trouble just because there's a war on!"

Molly reached over and picked up the other girl's copy of the daily paper. "How about that nice-looking sergeant, the Army Service Corps one? He doesn't seem to be able to take his eyes off you every time he comes over."

Gertrude sniffed. "It doesn't cost nothin' to look!" she said. " 'E'd be willin' to stand and feast 'is eyes on me all day, but when it comes to treatin' me in the canteen. . . . Why, if I was to give 'im a piece of sugar for 'is 'orse, 'e'd put it in 'is pocket!"

Molly laughed and turned over a page.

" 'E's so stingy that if 'e was goin' to marry me, 'e'd borrow 'is widowed mother's weddin' ring! 'Andsome is as 'andsome does, I sez!" Having wiped herself with powder, Gertrude went over her eyebrows and lips with a wet finger tip. Then she put the vanity case away. "I've just got to change my stockin's," she said. "I don't like sittin' in them movies with wet feet. Takes my mind off the picture."

"You'd better hurry," said Molly, "or we sha'n't be able to get a seat at all."

Gertrude peeled off her wet stockings and hung them over the rail of the bed, wiggling her cold toes as she did so. "Don't worry!" she laughed. "A couple of smiles'll get us seats in any show in this army! . . . Why, dearie, what's the matter?"

Molly's face was ashen. She was staring at the casualty returns on that fatal page in the newspaper.

In a flash, Gertrude was beside her, her arm round Molly's shoulder. "My Gawd! 'E ain't — dead? 'Ere, where is it? Show me!"

Molly's icy finger found Jack's name.

Breathing hard, Gertrude saw that the name was not in the list of killed, but among the wounded.

Front seats. . . . Base hospitals full. . . . Molly covered her face with her hands to shut out the picture of endless stretchers being piled into ambulances.

Gertrude gave a choky laugh. "Wounded! My, you give me a turn! Why, dearie, don't take on! Probably it ain't nothin' worse than a nice blighty, the sort of thing they all pray for!"

Molly sat up straight and gripped Gertrude's hand. "Yes, I know," she said. "But you and I have seen the other thing too. We might as well face it. He may be . . . I've got to get to him, that's all! D' you think we could find out to-night where he is? I'm going up to the headquarters office to see if there's anybody still there. And then I'm going to find my General, if I have to dig him out of the officers' mess! Will you come with me?"

Gertrude's blue eyes were alight. She leaned forward and kissed Molly explosively. "Not 'alf, I will!"

Chapter Seventeen

THE waiting room of the St. Charles Hospital was nearly full.

As Molly stepped through the swing doors, having left her name at the desk, she hardly dared look at the figures of the women who sat very still in chairs arranged all round the walls. Here and there was a man, too old for the army, pacing up and down.

With her heart thudding, she sank into the first vacant chair and locked her fingers together tightly. There was a queer sense of dread in the room, a tense expectancy, as though these people were prisoners awaiting sentence.

Presently a nurse came in. A rustle communicated itself. She called a name in a soft voice. One of the woman got up and went out with her. The rest took another breath and sat back.

It was hard to sit still. Molly's eyes began to go timidly from face to face. She did not want them to see that she was looking, to think that she was prying. Suddenly she froze, — her gaze on a woman who sat by herself in a corner, looking out at nothing, an open letter in her lap. It was Mrs. Ingleside, grey, crumpled, spent.

For a moment Molly was unable to move. There could be only one interpretation of the look in Mrs. Ingleside's face. Fear blotted out the room, filled her

brain with blazing sentences. "Jack's . . . gone! Jack . . ."

Somehow she got to her feet, went across the room, stood in front of her. "Mrs. Ingleside!"

There was no recognition in the eyes that looked up. Mrs. Ingleside was contemplating two small boys on the banks of the Suez Canal, such sturdy little boys . . .

Molly dropped into the next chair, caught one of Mrs. Ingleside's hands. "My dear . . . oh, my dear. . . ."

Then Mrs. Ingleside came back. "Molly! How nice of . . ."

"Jack!" whispered Molly. "Tell me!"

Mrs. Ingleside patted the girl's hand. In a strangely flat voice she said, "He was asking for you this morning. I only left him a little while ago. He . . . There, child, there!"

The reaction from that frightful fear was too great. Molly's face curled up. Her whole body shook.

Very quietly, Mrs. Ingleside went on patting the girl's hand, while Molly tried to strangle her sobs with a handkerchief. "He's over the worst of it, dear! The doctor says he'll get well again in time. He'll probably walk with a limp for the rest of his life, but, after all, that's a small thing comparatively, and you and I will try and take care of him, won't we?"

Molly tried to say yes, but only succeeded in making a queer noise. With bent head, she remained twisting and untwisting her soaked handkerchief. It wouldn't have been fair to look up. Some other woman might see the infinite gladness that flamed behind her tears. "I . . . I can't tell you how thankful

I am!" she stammered. "It's . . . it's wonderful, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Mrs. Ingleside was looking out again. "To me it's all senseless and cruel."

"Yes," said Molly, "but he's out of it all now! That's what is so wonderful! . . . And Tom? How is he? Have you heard from him since . . ."

Mrs. Ingleside's hand moved to the letter in her lap. For some moments she did not speak. Then she said slowly, "That's what I'm trying to understand. Tom's . . . out of it all, too."

Molly's twisting fingers became still. Her eyes were wide on the older woman's face. She gave a stifled cry. "No! . . . Oh, no!"

Mrs. Ingleside went on, almost as though she were repeating something to herself. "First Father . . . now Tom." She shook her head. "His commanding officer has written to me. He says that Tom was . . . was killed, saving Jack. He was . . . shot down on top of a trench to which he had carried him, after Jack was wounded."

With unsteady hands she folded the letter and put it in her handbag. Then she turned to Molly. "It isn't only that Tom is dead. It is that Jack is cut in half by his death. That frightens me. I don't know whether we are going to be able to give him enough, you and I."

No one paid any attention to these two talking in undertones in their corner. The attention of those other women was turned inwards, each to her own calvary. If one more young girl, with agony in her eyes, chose to put her arms round an older woman

who seemed numb, it was nothing but a familiar gesture of a common experience.

Presently Mrs. Ingleside rose. "I must go now," she said, "not that I have anything to do, but simply because I can't go on sitting here. When you've seen Jack, will you come round to my hotel? He'll tell you where it is."

Molly stood up. "I should like to stay with you, if I may?"

Mrs. Ingleside kissed her. "That's kind of you, dear," she said. Then she walked steadily down the room.

Molly stood gazing at the swing doors as they closed behind her. Saving Jack! The words went echoing endlessly through her brain. Saving Jack! . . . He didn't loathe him. He had gone out there and carried him in. Could she ever begin to make it up . . .

Her name was being called. The nurse who waited for her raised an eyebrow at the sight of her uniform, and began to talk as she led the way upstairs.

"Have you been out in France?"

"Yes," said Molly.

"You're lucky!" said the nurse. "I haven't been able to wangle it. You must have had a marvellous time!"

"Yes," said Molly.

"Home on leave now?"

"Yes," said Molly.

"Where are you stationed?"

"Yes," said Molly.

The nurse looked at her sharply, sniffed. The girl wasn't even polite enough to listen! She tilted her

head and marched along in silence. At last she stopped and opened a door. "Eighth bed down on the left!" she snapped.

Molly started, repeated it. "Eighth bed down on the left. . . . Thank you very much!"

Eighth bed down . . . She mustn't forget that. Eighth . . . on the left.

As the door was shut behind her, Molly clung to the handle while she took her bearings, tried to realise the sight of all those cots, and the smell of ether that caught her by the throat. Then, very carefully, she began to count as she walked down the line. . . . There was a great hoop on the eighth bed. . . . She choked. What was . . . He's going to get well! He's going to get well! . . . She clung to the thought, as she had to the door handle, fists clenched, until she reached the bed.

Out of a motionless body Jack's eyes came reaching for her.

Molly gave a little cry and dropped on her knees beside him.

His head and one arm seemed to be the only parts of him that were not swathed in bandaging.

"I knew you'd come," he said. "I've been waiting for you every day!"

"Jack! . . . My darling Jack!" Very carefully, dreading to hurt him, she leaned over and kissed him with trembling lips.

Jack smiled. "Those were the last things you said and did that day in Boulogne. . . . Remember? . . . Would you mind giving me your hand so that I can hang on to it?"

Molly locked his hand in both of hers.

"That's . . . wonderful!" breathed Jack.

At her elbow was that hoop over his legs. Merely to look at it made her blood run cold. And his hand was so utterly without strength. "I . . . I saw your mother downstairs," she said. "She told me you were . . . were getting along splendidly. Are you, Jack?"

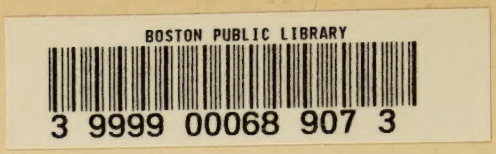
"There's nothing to worry about any more," said Jack. "They had quite a time getting the bullets out of me, apparently, but all I've got to do now is to heal. It's nothing compared to some of these poor devils." He paused. When he spoke again, it seemed that something had gone out of his voice. "So you . . . saw Mother. Did she . . . tell you about . . . Tom?"

Molly bowed her head. The sight of his face was too much. All she could do was to press his hand.

For a long time neither of them spoke.

Then Jack said, "It was like him, wasn't it, to come out like that? The sort of magnificent thing he would do! . . . Just before I passed out, he . . . he called my name. So we were . . . pals again! It would be hell without that! Even with that, I'd let them take me into the operating room again and saw off both legs if it would bring him back. . . . You see, he and I . . ." He choked. At last his wet eyes came back to the girl's bent head and he said, "I'm afraid you'll have to let me hold on to your hand quite a lot from now on, Molly. . . ."

END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